

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY RUTH A. GALLAHER

VOL. XXVII ISSUED IN DECEMBER 1946 No. 12

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The First State Governor

To be the first in a long line of distinguished men is in itself an honor and the opportunity to be the first Governor of the State of Iowa might well have been coveted one hundred years ago. The position was not, however, as popular as might have been expected. Many Iowans sought Federal positions, but relatively few were avowed candidates for the governorship of their own State. How Ansel Briggs came by the office and what he did as the first State Governor of Iowa has come, in this centennial year, to be a matter of much interest.

Ansel Briggs was not a renowned statesman; nor was he a shrewd politician who carefully planned, step by step, how he might gain the governorship. Indeed, he was probably more than a little surprised to find himself elected to that high office. His nomination was something of a political accident, a fortunate accident as it happened, for he was honorable and upright in his dealings

and a faithful servant of the people. If he was not the most brilliant nor the most renowned of Iowa's Governors, he was loyal, faithful, and just — a man of the common people.

Ansel Briggs was born in Vermont on February 3, 1806. He acquired a common school education and had the advantage of attending Norwich Academy for one term. As a young man he moved with his parents to Guernsey County, Ohio, near Cambridge, where the father engaged in farming. It is recorded, however, that Ansel, the oldest son, "was more interested in the stagecoaches and wagons that hauled big loads through on the old Wheeling road than he was in farming".

He soon acquired teams of his own and engaged in the overland transportation of goods and the operation of stagecoaches. The account book of William McCracken, a pioneer blacksmith of Cambridge, reveals that young Briggs was frugal and thrifty. He paid "fifty-seven and one-half cents for getting one shoe toed and two set; twenty-five cents for repair on his wagon-bed; twelve and one-half cents for a log-chain link; ten cents for getting a single-tree ironed; and twelve and one-half cents to have his harrow teeth sharpened." Meanwhile, Briggs supplied McCracken with coal at six cents a bushel, and hauled 4,266

pounds of goods from Wheeling, now in West Virginia, at the rate of seventy-five cents per hundred pounds.

Benjamin Briggs, Ansel's father, was killed in an accident while driving one of Ansel's teams with a load of salt, leaving the mother to care for a large family of children. Soon thereafter the family moved into Cambridge, where Mrs. Briggs managed to provide a livelihood for her younger children by selling bread, cakes, and pies to the townsfolk and to travelers on the old Wheeling Road.

Meanwhile Ansel Briggs, then affiliated with the Whig Party, became deputy sheriff of Guernsey County. Meanwhile, too, he gained the respect of Major James Dunlap, a former officer in the War of 1812, who encouraged him to enter politics. Under the tutelage of Major Dunlap, young Briggs ran for the office of county auditor. He lost the election, but he won the heart and hand of the major's daughter, Nancy Dunlap, whom he married in the fall of 1830.

By the middle of the decade of the thirties, Briggs had resolved to cast his lot with the pioneers of the new West. He journeyed to St. Louis, where he was much interested in the shipping and mercantile activities, but he soon ventured on to the valley of the Upper Mississippi.

There he learned of the frontier settlements at Burlington, Davenport, and Dubuque, but he chose to avoid river bottom land and, through the acquaintance and friendship of the Forbes family of Bellevue, he became interested in land above the ridge on Brush Creek in what is now Jackson County. There he located, soon to become one of the founders of the town of Andrew.

In Iowa, as in Ohio, Ansel Briggs operated stagecoach and transportation lines. He also had contracts with the government for carrying the mail to and from pioneer settlements. In this way he became familiar with conditions on the frontier, formed lasting friendships with pioneer settlers, and built for himself a clientele that was of inestimable value to him in later years. Among the men most closely associated with Briggs during these early years were Nathaniel Butterworth, Philip Barr Bradley, John Francis, and Judge John J. Dyer.

Butterworth was a stalwart pioneer who came to Iowa about the time that Briggs arrived and established a stagecoach tavern in the Brush Creek community, not far from the present site of Andrew. Briggs and Butterworth became close associates in business. There were, however, obvious points of difference. "Butterworth was fond of telling of his misfortunes while Briggs kept his

misfortunes strictly to himself. Briggs liked to swap horses. Butterworth preferred to sell his and collect the price agreed upon, to the cent."

Philip B. Bradley was a native of Connecticut, a graduate of Union College, Schenectady, New York, and at one time had been a resident of Galena, Illinois. He was a man of culture and refinement who, upon the urgent solicitation of Ansel Briggs, came at length to make his home at the flourishing little town of Andrew.

John Francis was realtor and partner of Ansel Briggs. At the time the town of Andrew was established the firm of Briggs and Francis acquired a considerable number of lots which were subsequently sold to interested parties. On one occasion Francis told a newspaper reporter in his laconic way, that when trouble was in the offing "Mr. Briggs could always be depended upon to pour oil on the troubled waters." As realtors on the frontier Briggs and Francis had many friends.

Judge John J. Dyer was at one time a resident of Andrew. Later he became a distinguished Federal judge and a resident of Dubuque. Judge Dyer, perhaps more than any one else, was responsible for the nomination and election of Ansel Briggs as the first State Governor of Iowa.

When Jackson County was first established in 1837 the town of Bellevue was designated as the

county seat. But the Bellevue War suggested unwholesome influences in that town and Ansel Briggs and Nathaniel Butterworth were active participants in a movement to transfer the county seat to the more nearly centrally located town of Andrew, where a log courthouse was erected.

Ansel Briggs had transferred his party allegiance to the Democratic Party before coming to Iowa, and he first appeared in Iowa politics in 1842 when he was nominated and elected by the Democrats as Representative from Jackson County in the Fifth Legislative Assembly of the Territory. This Assembly met for the first time at Iowa City. In the Assembly Mr. Briggs served as a member of the Committee on Enrolled Bills and was chairman of the Committee on Territorial Affairs.

In January of 1843 Representative Briggs presented to the Assembly a petition from the citizens of Jackson County asking that a charter be granted for the establishment of an academy at the town of Andrew. The petition was referred to a select committee of three, of which Briggs was chairman, and later an act was passed by the Assembly to incorporate the Jackson County Academy which was authorized to have a capital stock of not to exceed fifty thousand dollars.

After serving in the Legislative Assembly for

one session Briggs was elected sheriff of Jackson County in 1844 and served for one term — two years. He was recognized as a substantial citizen, but no one yet gave thought to his some day becoming Governor. In 1846 when the Democratic Party was seeking a candidate for the office of Governor of the proposed State of Iowa, no one seemed to be anxious to assume the leadership. The salary for the chief executive, as stipulated in the recently adopted Constitution, was “not to exceed one thousand dollars” — a rather meager salary even in those days.

George Wallace Jones and other leading Democrats of that day hoped that Judge John J. Dyer of Jackson County might be nominated and elected Governor. It was noted that at the election of August 3rd, Jackson County had ranked first among the counties of the Territory in the percentage of votes cast favoring the adoption of the Constitution of 1846, and it was agreed that it should be given the privilege of making the first nomination for Governor. It was generally believed that Judge Dyer would be the man selected, but Judge Dyer was interested in a Federal judgeship to which he was subsequently appointed, and he “positively declined” to be a candidate.

When the Democratic Convention met at Iowa City on September 24, 1846, prohibition of the

establishment of banks was one of the chief planks in the platform. At a banquet a few days before the nominating convention, Briggs had struck a responsive chord by offering the toast, "No banks but earth, and they well tilled." Judge Dyer, attending the convention as a delegate took advantage of the enthusiasm which had greeted this slogan and presented the name of his fellow townsman, Ansel Briggs. It is also recorded that the candidacy of Ansel Briggs may have been suggested to the Jackson County delegates by the *Governor Briggs*, a steamboat named for a former Governor of Massachusetts, which went up and down the Mississippi about this time. The nomination proved to be popular, although two other men were suggested — Judge Jesse Williams of Jefferson County and William Thompson of Henry County, known as "Black Bill". On the first ballot Briggs received 62 votes, Williams 32, and Thompson 31. Williams and Thompson then withdrew, and Briggs was nominated by acclamation.

The Whig candidate to oppose Briggs in the general election was Thomas McKnight of Dubuque. McKnight was a strong candidate — well qualified and widely known throughout the Territory. At this time, however, the Democratic Party controlled the political affairs in Iowa and

Briggs succeeded in obtaining 7,626 votes while McKnight had 7,379 — giving Briggs a majority of 247. And so, on December 3, 1846, Ansel Briggs was inaugurated as the first Governor of the State of Iowa.

The inauguration services were simple. A committee of two Senators and two Representatives escorted the Governor elect into the House Chamber of the Capitol where Charles Mason, Chief Justice of the Territorial Supreme Court, administered the oath of office. Governor Briggs explained that he had been notified of his election only four days earlier and had not had time to formulate a policy. His short inaugural address was read by Senator Philip B. Bradley.

Governor Briggs did not reside in Iowa City, preferring to remain in his home town, Andrew. He thought that there he could better resist the solicitations of political job seekers. Moreover, Nancy Dunlap Briggs, the Governor's wife, was in poor health, and Governor Briggs seemed to think that a river town was not a good place for an invalid. And so the Governor stopped at a tavern while attending legislative sessions at Iowa City, often riding horseback on his trips between Andrew and the capital or over the State.

Sometimes Governor Briggs was accompanied on his trips by Philip B. Bradley, influential

State Senator from Jackson County. Indeed, Bradley has been referred to as the "Thurlow Weed of Governor Briggs's political campaign and gubernatorial career". In matters of state it is said that Governor Briggs seldom made a major decision without conferring with Bradley, Butterworth, Judge Dyer, and other personal friends or political allies.

As Governor of Iowa from 1846 to 1850 Mr. Briggs proved to be a conservative, frugal, and honest chief executive. In his first biennial message he reported that on October 31, 1848 — almost two years after he had taken office — there was a balance in the State treasury of \$1,394. He reported, too, that the school laws were "exceedingly defective", and expressed regret that the wishes of the people relative to improved school legislation should have been so long frustrated. It was during Governor Briggs's administration that the State University of Iowa was founded.

Governor Briggs also gave attention to matters of internal improvement — the building of roads and bridges and the improvement of waterways. It was at this time that the citizens of Burlington, Mount Pleasant, and intervening communities became keenly interested in the building of "all-weather" roads. Railroads, then just coming into public attention, were considered too expensive

and besides there were yet no connecting roads across the Mississippi. The Iowa-Missouri boundary dispute, carried over from Territorial days, was finally settled during Governor Briggs's administration, while Iowa troops were called to participate in the Mexican War, in which a few prominent Iowans lost their lives. Among these was Frederick D. Mills who had called to order the convention which nominated Ansel Briggs.

Governor Briggs suffered personal bereavement during his administration as chief executive, for Mrs. Briggs passed away at their home in Andrew in 1848 and during the same year a little daughter also died. Governor and Mrs. Briggs were the parents of eight children, six of whom passed away in early childhood. One son, Ansel, Jr., died on May 15, 1867, at the age of twenty-five, without children. Another son, John S. Briggs, became editor of the *Idaho Herald* at Blackfoot, Idaho Territory, and was later a resident of Omaha, Nebraska. His daughter, Mrs. Nancy Briggs Robertson, is the only grandchild of Ansel Briggs having children. Ansel Briggs later married Mrs. Frances Carpenter, who died in 1859.

At the close of his term as Governor, Ansel Briggs retired from office, apparently by common agreement that one four-year term was enough. He continued to maintain his residence in Jackson

County where he engaged in commercial activities, although he was one of the founders of Florence, Nebraska, in 1856, and spent some time in Colorado in 1860, and in Montana from 1863 to 1865.

At Andrew Ansel Briggs enjoyed the companionship of old friends and lived over in pleasant retrospection the eventful days of his governorship. As the years passed he had the satisfaction of knowing that the hope he had expressed upon his retirement from the governorship — that the State which he had served as chief executive might “ever be distinguished for virtue, intelligence, and prosperity” — was being fulfilled.

In 1878 Ansel Briggs went to Omaha, Nebraska, to make his home with his son, John S. Briggs, and there he died on May 5, 1881. His remains were first interred at Omaha, but in 1909 the General Assembly of Iowa provided for their removal to Andrew and for the erection of a suitable monument in honor of Iowa's first State Governor. The monument bears an outline map of the State of Iowa and a bronze medallion portrait of the pleasant, rugged face of Ansel Briggs, the stagedriver who became Governor and left a rich heritage of honor.

JACOB A. SWISHER