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Church Foundations in Iowa

Religion held an important place in the thinking and activities of many of Iowa's early settlers. Soon after the Black Hawk Purchase was opened to white settlement, the Roman Catholics and several Protestant denominations were represented in the Iowa area. These pioneers held religious meetings in schoolhouses, warehouses, taverns, log cabins, or groves; itinerant preachers and priests traveled westward to minister to Indians and to white men on the frontier. By 1846, the year in which Iowa acquired statehood, these religious groups were building churches and schools, establishing religious organizations, and considering problems presented by the society of that day.

From the days of Father Jacques Marquette's visit to the Iowa country in 1673, the Roman Catholics had an interest in this area. Catholic explorers, traders, and missionaries were in Iowa previous to 1833 when the Black Hawk Purchase was unofficially opened to settlers, and some of

the earliest settlers of Iowa — Julien Dubuque and Louis Honoré Tesson — were French Catholics. On October 6, 1832, Father Charles Van Quickborne first conferred the sacrament of baptism on Iowa soil.

In 1834 the Rev. Charles Francis Fitzmaurice came to Dubuque as that city's first priest, but he died of cholera shortly after his arrival. His worthy successor was Rev. Samuel Charles Mazuchelli, under whose leadership a stone church, the second church building in Iowa, was begun in 1835, dedicated to St. Raphael, the Archangel. Four years later, in April, 1839, Mathias Loras came to Dubuque as the first bishop of the Roman Catholic church in Iowa.

Bishop Loras was untiring in his efforts to bring Christianity to settlers on the frontier, and under his guidance the Catholic Church gained a firm foothold in Iowa. By 1846 a number of churches had been built and Catholic schools had been opened in several towns. At Council Bluffs, on the westernmost border of the Iowa country, we find Father Christian Hoecken visiting an Indian mission in 1846 and baptizing thirty-eight infants and a dying squaw. This Potawatomie mission had been opened by Father Pierre Jean De Smet in 1838.

In the summer of 1834 a group of Methodists

at Dubuque erected the first house of worship in Iowa, a small log church, 20 by 26 feet in size, costing \$255. From that year the Methodist Episcopal Church developed steadily in Iowa until by 1846 it had become one of the strongest church bodies in the State. Methodist circuit riders were ever active in carrying Christian teachings to the frontier and in establishing new churches. Thirty-one preachers attended the first Iowa Annual Conference meeting when that group was organized at Iowa City on August 14, 1844. Bishop Thomas A. Morris, first bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Iowa, presided and opened the conference by reading the fifth chapter of First Peter: "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder". At the third session of the Iowa Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, held at Bloomington (Muscatine), September 2-7, 1846, a total of 7,812 church members in the four Iowa districts was reported.

The Methodist Protestant Church, a group which had broken away from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1830 because of dissatisfaction with the episcopal form of church government, was also active in Iowa in 1846. This group laid the cornerstone for the first church in Iowa City on May 12, 1841, and organized the first session of the Iowa Conference of the Methodist Protes-

tant Church in the fall of 1846. The *Iowa Standard* for October 7th printed the following announcement:

“The first session of the Iowa Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church will be held in Iowa City, State of Iowa, commencing on the second Tuesday 13th of October next 1846, session to commence at 10 o'clock in the forenoon. Opening address by some Minister in attendance, perhaps by the Rev. W. H. Collins, at 11 o'clock of the same day, at the State House.”

The first sermon delivered in Iowa is said to have been preached at Dubuque on August 11, 1833, by a Presbyterian minister from Galena, Illinois. This was Rev. Aratus Kent, who was serving as a missionary for the American Home Missionary Society supported jointly by the Presbyterian and Congregational churches. He preached in an unfurnished log cabin with a box for a pulpit and a number of rough boards for pews.

A group of soldiers and officers of the U. S. Army, government employees, and a few Indians were members of the first Presbyterian church (Cumberland branch) in Iowa. This church was organized at Ion in what is now Allamakee County in 1834, but it disappeared following the removal of the Indians. A second Cumberland

Presbyterian church was founded on Sugar Creek in Des Moines County in 1836, and an Old School church, probably the most famous of early Presbyterian churches, was opened at West Point in Lee County in 1837. The first Iowa Presbytery (Old School) was formed at Bloomington, on November 6, 1840, with delegates from nine churches in attendance. The New School Presbyterians organized their first Presbytery at Yellow Spring (now Kossuth, Des Moines County) on April 12, 1842.

Like the Methodists and Presbyterians, the Baptists organized their first Iowa church in 1834, twelve years before Iowa became a State. On October 20th of that year eleven people assembled in the cabin of Noble Hously in Lee County to hear Elder John Logan preach. Thus originated the Danville Baptist Church. The first Iowa Baptist Convention was held at Iowa City on June 3 and 4, 1842, with eight ministers and seventeen layment attending. By 1845 the Baptist membership in Iowa was 523.

On June 3, 1846, when there were Baptist churches at Davenport, Dubuque, Keosauqua, Bloomington, Iowa City, Washington, Bonaparte, Mt. Pleasant, Agency City, Fairfield, and several smaller towns, the *Iowa Capital Reporter* announced the annual Baptist convention to be held

at Iowa City "to commence with the annual Sermon on Friday next (the 5th inst.) at half past 10 o'clock A. M. — Exercises will continue three days."

An interesting sidelight on this convention is given by C. R. Aurner who says thirty or more of the convention delegates were quartered in the house of the Iowa City pastor. Cots were obtained from the American Hotel for the women, while the men used buffalo robes and blankets and slept on the floor. All who could not find room there had to take to the barn. It was said that over three hundred meals were provided at that house during the convention. Indeed, such a gathering must have made an impression on the capital city, for a good Methodist sister, quite awe-struck, was reported to have exclaimed, "I did not know there were so many Baptists in the world."

Although they were later in arriving than some other religious groups, the Congregationalists became another influential sect in early Iowa. A group of New Englanders established the Congregational Church at Denmark in 1836, and two years later Rev. Asa Turner came from Illinois to be the pastor of this flock. A convention held at Denmark in November, 1840, marked the beginning of a Congregational Association in Iowa. In 1843 the famous Iowa Band, eleven young Con-

gregational and Presbyterian ministers from Andover Theological Seminary, arrived in Iowa and began to exert their influence on religion and education in the Territory. By 1846 the Congregationalists had twenty-three ordained ministers and thirty-two churches in Iowa. There were Congregational church buildings at Denmark, Fairfield, Cascade, Bloomington, Dubuque, and Burlington.

The first services of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Iowa were held in 1836 when occasional ministrations were conducted at Dubuque by the Rev. Richard F. Cadle. A year later the Rt. Rev. Dr. Philander Chase, Bishop of Illinois, officiated at Episcopal services in the hotel at Rockingham in Scott County with thirty or forty people in attendance. On February 2, 1840, an Episcopal Church was organized at Burlington with Rev. John Batchelder as its rector.

In 1841 the domestic committee of the board of missions of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States appointed the Rev. Zachariah Goldsmith as missionary to Davenport, and on the 14th of October the same year Trinity Church was organized at that place. The first Episcopal church building in Iowa was erected at Bloomington in 1841, but the members shared their chapel with the Presbyterians, and the second floor of the building was used by the Masons.

Thirteen Disciples of Christ organized the Lost Creek Church of Christ in Lee County on "the first Lord's day" in July, 1836. Their first services were held in the double log cabin of Isaac Briggs, a dwelling which had been remodeled to answer the purposes of a church. This house of worship was used by the Disciples until 1849. Another early Disciples of Christ congregation was organized on Long Creek in Louisa County in 1836 or 1837. This later became the Columbus City Christian Church.

The first society of the Christian Church at Fort Madison was organized in 1838, and at Davenport in 1839. On March 25, 1846, the Disciples founded a church at Oskaloosa with a charter which read: "We the undersigned do hereby agree to worship together as a Church of Christ, to take the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice and to be called Christians after the name of Christ our Lord."

The Quakers, too, settled in Iowa soon after the Indians disappeared from the Black Hawk Purchase. In the fall of 1835 Isaac Pidgeon with his family came to locate a claim on Little Cedar Creek in Henry County. About a year later Aaron Street, another Friend, arrived in Iowa and the two men conceived the idea of founding a Quaker community. They called their settlement

Salem. The first regular business meeting of the Society of Friends west of the Mississippi was conducted at Salem, on October 8, 1838. By 1846 several other Quaker settlements had been made in Iowa, including Cedar Creek, Pleasant Prairie or Pleasant Plain, New Garden, Richland, East Grove, Chestnut Hill, and Spring Creek.

Amish settlers were in Lee and Johnson counties by 1846. It is probable that Christian Raber of the Lee County settlement was the first Amish preacher in Iowa, and the Lee County church may have been organized under him in 1845. Some believe that the first Amish church did not originate until 1846 under the guidance of Elder Joseph Goldsmith.

Other religious groups in early Iowa included the United Brethren in Christ, the Universalists, and the German Evangelicals. Rev. Christian Troup of the United Brethren Church came to Iowa as a missionary in 1836 and settled upon what is now a part of the site of Mount Vernon. He and Rev. John Burns, a local preacher, seem to have been the pioneers for the United Brethren in Iowa. The first society was organized at the home of "Father" Edington, probably somewhere in Henry County, in October, 1841. The first annual conference of the United Brethren in Iowa convened at Columbus City in Louisa County, on

May 19, 1844, with Bishop Henry Kumler, Jr., presiding.

One hundred years ago Iowa newspapers advertised the 1846 annual convention of Universalists to be held at Iowa City in September. The first Universalist society had been organized at Iowa City on November 6, 1841. During that same year the First German Evangelical Church of Burlington was organized in an upper room.

The Mormons, too, were in Iowa a century ago. In February, 1846, a large number of the Latter Day Saints crossed the Mississippi River from Illinois and began to make their way across Iowa. They had been driven from Nauvoo, Illinois, and now, led by Brigham Young, they began their westward migration that was to carry them across the plains to their new home in Utah.

The preachers and priests of these early Iowa churches were men of physical daring and deep religious conviction. Frequently they were itinerants, traveling great distances to hold meetings at widely divergent places, meeting every obstacle of nature — drenching rain, swollen rivers, bitter cold, and oppressive heat. Their work often separated them from their families, and their pay was small, largely in “produce and promises”. But still they carried on.

Rev. Launcelot Graham Bell, an early Presby-

terian preacher, received only \$100 from his congregations from 1836 to 1842. He exemplified the generous spirit typical of these early preachers when he said: "The settlers generally were poor, struggling for homes; . . . the times were disastrous, and their perplexities great. In such a region and under such circumstances the ministry of the word must be gratuitous or not at all." In 1846 Rev. Asa Turner at Denmark had a salary of \$300, and was obliged to borrow money to support his family.

Activities of these early churches were varied. During warm weather the camp meeting was an occasion for spiritual refreshment and social activity. The following notice of a Methodist camp meeting appeared in the *Iowa Capital Reporter* for June 3, 1846:

"The Camp Meeting for Washington Circuit will commence on Thursday the 17th of June, at Mr. Cooper's Grove, about three fourths of a mile from the bridge across English river, on the military road leading from Iowa City to Mt. Pleasant — distant from Iowa City, 14 miles.

"Ministerial brethren and friends are invited to attend."

Camp meetings had become popular in the late 1700's and early 1800's, and had almost passed their peak of popularity by the time Iowa became

a State. Held out-of-doors, they often continued for several days or a week. According to one account, the camp site was usually "chosen near a swift running creek, and in a grove of heavy timber. A huge tent was raised. . . . In the front of the tent a large platform was built for the preachers. There were usually three or four of them. The congregation was seated on improvised benches, planks placed across strings of logs. Through the center an aisle led to the speakers' table and the converts' bench." The preachers at these meetings were sincere men, more noted for their powerful lungs and emotions than for polished oratory and logic. Their voices led out in the hymn singing as well as in their sermons and prayers.

Families came from miles around to attend these meetings, bringing supplies of food and cooking utensils. Concessionaires sometimes dispensed lemonade, gingerbread, dried herring, raisins, candy, or watermelons. Apparently this ware-vending was occasionally carried so far as to become obnoxious, for a resolution adopted by the Methodist Iowa Conference session in 1845 began, "Whereas, we are greatly annoyed at our camp-meetings by the sale of cake, beer and other articles".

Sunday schools were sponsored by the early

churches. The first Sunday school in Iowa was organized in March, 1834, at Dubuque by Mrs. Susan A. Dean, a Methodist. It was supported by other Protestant denominations, however. William R. Ross started a similar Sabbath school at Burlington in the summer of 1834 with a library brought from Cincinnati which cost \$12.50. Five years later, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Congregationalists united in their support of the first Sunday school in Bloomington. A report of a Methodist Iowa Conference committee in 1846 said, "we view the Sabbath school cause as a most powerful and efficient auxiliary" and "we deeply regret our past remissness in this most important work". During the conference year of 1845-46 there were 83 Methodist Sabbath schools in Iowa, with 640 officers and teachers and 3,301 scholars.

The Bible and hymn books were the principal texts in these pioneer Sunday schools, and pupils memorized long passages from the Scriptures as a part of their religious training.

Pioneers of 1846 were persevering and enthusiastic in their support of church building projects. During that year improvements were being made on the outer structure of the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Burlington, later known as "Old Zion", at a cost of \$1,200. In the same year the

Friends at Salem, having outgrown their original hewed-log meeting house, subscribed \$1,149 toward the construction of a new building. The Congregationalists were dedicating new churches at Dubuque, Denmark, and Burlington at costs of \$3,000, \$4,000, and \$6,000 respectively.

In addition to erecting churches, these people founded schools. A number of church groups had established educational institutions — academies, colleges, and seminaries — even before Iowa became a State.

Bishop Mathias Loras of Dubuque reporting on the condition of his diocese in 1849 said:

“We have established a house for Sisters of Charity who bring up 24 young people of rich families, and keep a day school in Dubuque for 60 children and a few orphans . . .

“We are preparing for the erection of a petit seminary, and which for a time will serve as a grand seminary, and which will be devoted to the education of young natives for the sanctuary. Already a few of them have begun their ecclesiastical studies.” He described two Catholic schools which were in session in Dubuque in 1846. One of these was the Sisters of Charity Female Academy and day school started in 1843, the other was St. Raphael’s Seminary which Bishop Loras had opened at his own residence in 1839.

Ground was broken for St. Anthony's Church and School in Davenport in 1838 and the building was dedicated in 1839. Father J. A. M. Pelamourgues conducted classes in this parochial school beginning in 1839. The next year a parochial school was opened at Fort Madison. The first Catholic school in Johnson County was St. Mary's of the Visitation which opened in the basement of the Iowa City church in 1846 with Miss Norma O'Connor and Father Anthony Godfert serving as teachers.

The Presbyterians were sponsoring two schools in Iowa before 1846 — a seminary or academy at West Point, established in 1838, and an academy at Yellow Spring which was started in 1844. The West Point Seminary did not, however, begin class work until 1842 when Rev. John M. Fulton, a Presbyterian minister, became principal. Five years later it became the Des Moines Valley College. In the winter of 1844, a charter was obtained from the Territorial legislature incorporating Jefferson Academy, a Presbyterian-sponsored school, which was located near what is now the town of Mediapolis. Its first principal was Rev. Bennett Roberts, who was assisted in his work by his daughter, Louise.

The Mount Pleasant Collegiate Institute, which later became Iowa Wesleyan College, was incor-

porated in 1844. This early college and Iowa City College, located at the capital, were under the patronage and support of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1846. Snethen Seminary, opened at Iowa City in 1844 under the patronage of the Methodist Protestant Church, was also in session in 1846.

Denmark Academy began its first session in September, 1845, to instruct the "youth of both sexes in science and literature". Rev. Albert A. Sturges acted as principal and professor. Iowa College, another Congregational school, which later became Grinnell College, had its beginnings in Davenport in 1846 with the Iowa Band sponsoring its founding.

The Baptists also felt the need of organizing a church school. At the State convention in 1844 establishment of an institution of learning was advocated. At an 1846 meeting the educational committee reported that, "we deem it highly important to enter into immediate arrangements for establishing said literary institution, and that we present the various proposals received to the Convention in committee of the whole, to discuss and decide upon the respective claims." After much discussion it was voted upon and passed by a majority of three to locate a school at Agency City. The vote was later reconsidered, however.

In 1846, as in 1946, churches were faced with social problems. The temperance movement had begun in Iowa some years before 1846 and temperance societies had been organized as early as 1838. Bishop Loras of the Catholic Church was a zealous temperance advocate when he entered his Iowa see, and he was joined in his views by Father Joseph Cretin. These "active prohibitionists" worked together in organizing Catholic Total-Abstinence Societies in Iowa.

Protestants were holding temperance meetings in 1846, for a notice in the *Bloomington Herald*, May 15, 1846, read: "Mr. M. R. Gushee will deliver a Temperance Lecture, THIS EVENING, at the Methodist Church at early candle lighting. The public are respectfully solicited to attend." At the General Congregational Association meeting at Dubuque the 4th, 5th, and 6th of June, 1846, the following resolution regarding the use of liquor was adopted:

"That in our opinion, the use of, or the traffic in intoxicating liquors as a beverage, is inconsistent in our community, at the present day, with credible Christian character."

The slavery question was another problem facing 1846 churches. The Quakers were actively meeting the problem by participating in the Underground Railroad which had many stations in

Quaker settlements throughout Iowa. At almost every Congregational Association meeting from that organization's beginning in 1840 until the outbreak of the Civil War, strong declarations denouncing the "curse" of slavery were heard. In 1846 the Association resolved "That we regard the system of slavery, as it exists in the United States, as a sin against God, a curse to the master, and a grievous sin to the slave", and that "fellowship with slaveholding churches and professors, voluntarily continuing to be such after suitable admonition, is inconsistent with a faithful reproof of, and non-fellowship with, the unfruitful works of darkness." The Methodist Episcopal Church separated into a northern and a southern branch in 1844 over the same question. Few churches of the Methodist Episcopal Church South were organized in Iowa. The Iowa Conference of 1846 adopted resolutions favoring the colonization of Negroes.

In 1846 the United States was at war with Mexico and Christian churches were preaching and praying for peace. In June the *Davenport Gazette* announced: "The Presbyterian General Assembly have recommended the first Sabbath in July to be observed as a day of humiliation and prayer on account of war, and ministers are requested on that day to preach in behalf of peace."

One hundred years ago church members were considering the problem of Christian use of leisure time. The Methodist Iowa Conference meeting at Bloomington (Muscatine) in 1846, adopted a resolution concerning recreational amusements: "That in the opinion of this Conference it is altogether improper for the members of our church to attend circuses, shows, plays, and all such places, and that we will set ourselves against it and deal with them as for other immoralities." The question of membership in secret societies was also debated in some church meetings.

It is evident that the church, the home, and the school worked together in shaping the lives of the people in 1846. As Iowans look back one hundred years they must be grateful to those pioneers for laying a sound foundation for later church development in the State.

CORNELIA MALLET BARNHART