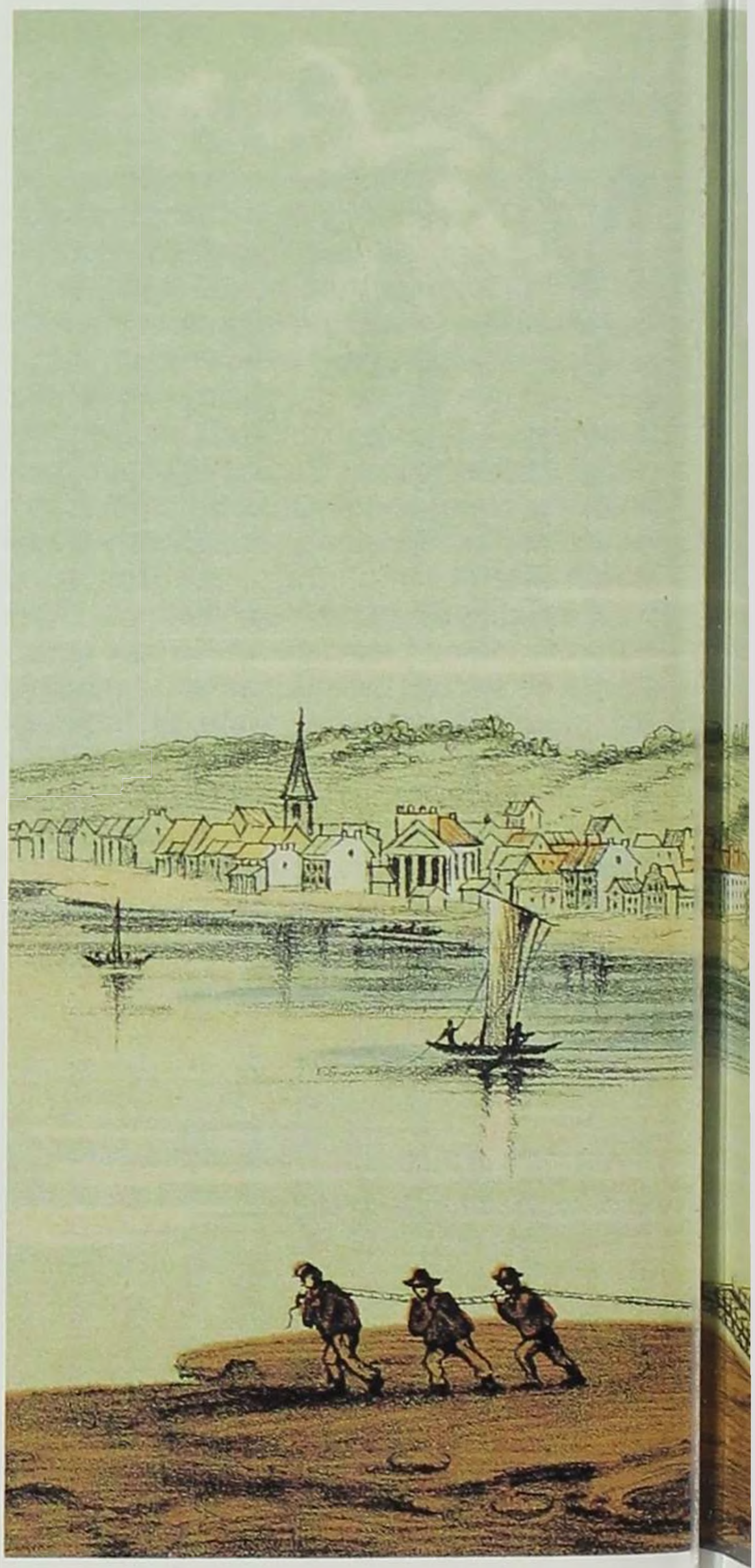
The Priest Behind the Legends

Father John Alleman

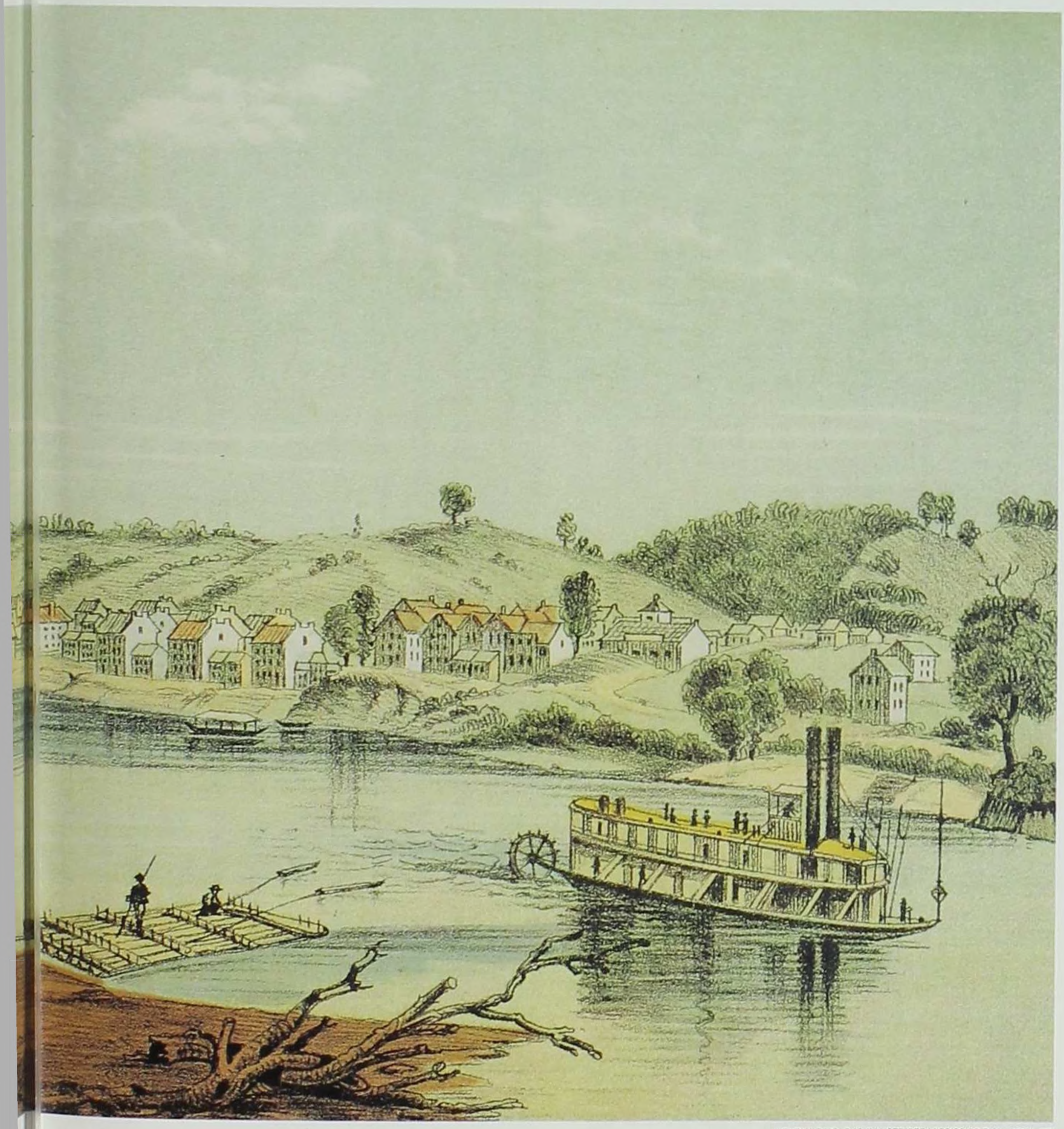
by Thomas Auge

THE AMERICAN FRONTIER offered a second chance to those who had failed in more settled and organized societies. Such was the experience of Father John Alleman. Described as "a dead loss" by his Dominican superior and eventually expelled from that order, Alleman later served with great zeal and success as a missionary priest on the Iowa-Illinois frontier.

Father Alleman lives fondly in the memories of the descendants of the people he served. In the one hundred and fifty years since he arrived in Fort Madison, legends and stories concerning his self-sacrificing accomplishments have flourished. Unfortunately the real Father Alleman has been lost in these exaggerated and even implausible stories. But piec-



Fort Madison was Father John Alleman's first parish in the Iowa Territory. The Catholic priest arrived here in 1841, about five years before this sketch was made by German emigrant-artist Henry Lewis.



HENRY LEWIS, *DAS ILLUSTRIRTE MISSISSIPPITHAL* (1854- 57)

ing together the historical evidence suggests that John Alleman was a person who struggled amidst difficult circumstances, who sometimes failed, and who was finally overwhelmed by the burdens facing frontier priests.

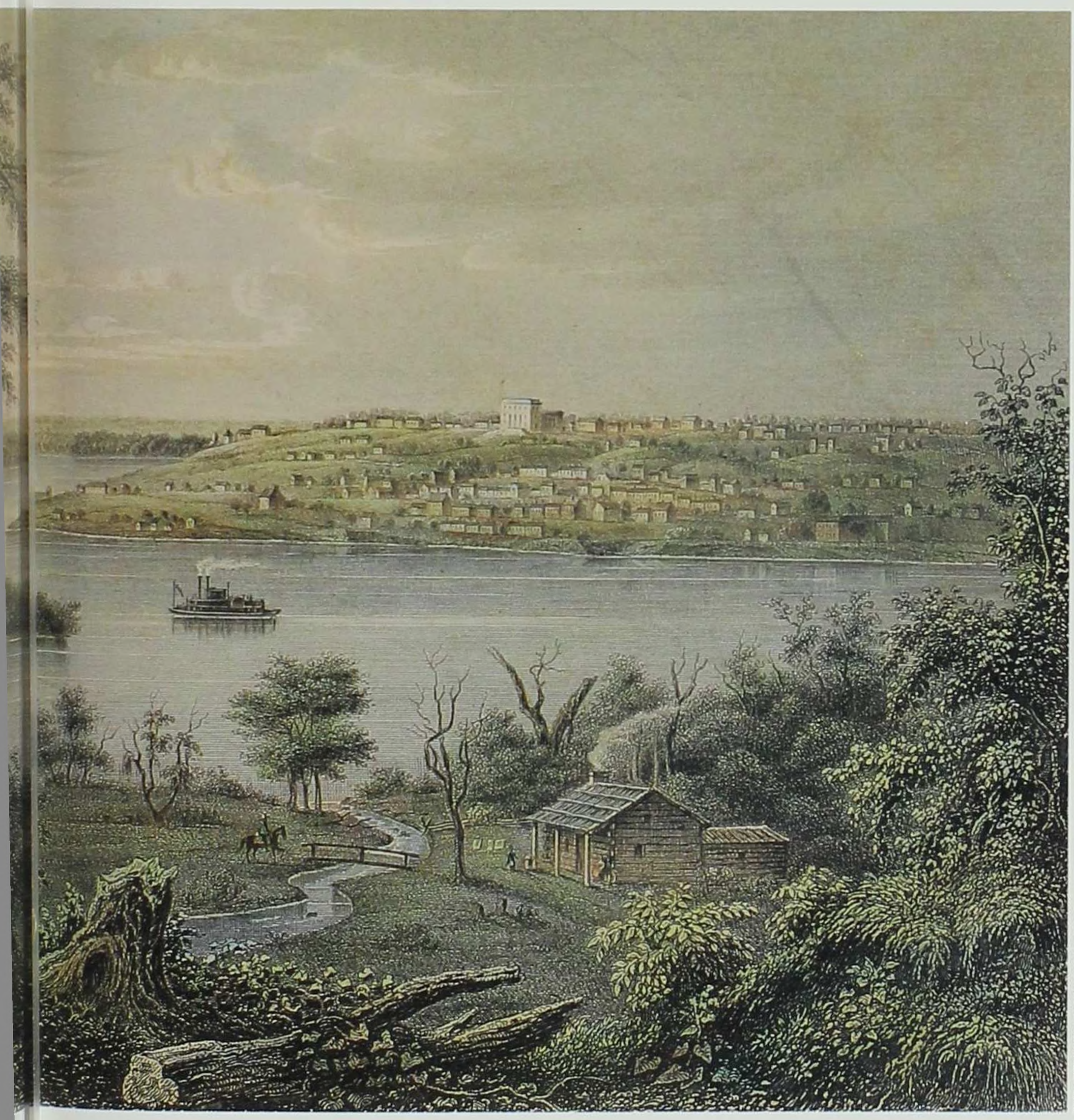
For the most part the historical record fails us with regard to Alleman's early life. We do know that he was born on December 3, 1804, in the village of Attenschwiller in Alsace, France. In 1832 at age twenty-eight, he was preparing to become a priest at the Dominican priory at St. Rose, Kentucky. Unfortunately, we have no knowledge of his formative years, nor do we know what circumstances led him to America and the seminary at St. Rose. Nevertheless, historians, like all who deal in second-hand goods, must fill their shelves with what they can find, even if the goods are incomplete and imperfect.

Proceeding from effect to cause, therefore, we can write with assurance that Alleman brought with him to Kentucky the fruits of a good education. He was fluent not only in his native German but in English and French as well. Furthermore, he must have come to St. Rose armed with some knowledge of philosophy and theology since he spent only two years at the seminary rather than the usual four. That he was nearly thirty years old when, in June 1834, he received the sacrament of Holy Orders, also suggests training prior to his arrival at St. Rose. Finally his letters, the few that have survived, are those of an educated person.



THE NEWLY ORDAINED Father Alleman possessed in great measure the qualities necessary for ministering to the scattered Catholics of the American West. A very large man, Alleman would benefit from his great strength and endurance. Full of zeal, he challenged the rigors of frontier life, dedicating himself completely to the vocation to which he was committed. His mastery of three languages also stood him in good stead, because the American Catholic church in the mid-nineteenth century was an institution whose congregations comprised for the most part German and Irish immigrants, while many of the clergy and hierarchy were French. Few, indeed, were the priests who came to the frontier as well-armed as Father John Alleman.

Despite these admirable traits and skills, he failed dismally in Ohio. After having served the Catholics of Canton, Zanesville, and Somerset, Ohio, he was ordered by his superiors to return



FROM HERRMANN J. MEYER, *UNITED STATES ILLUSTRATED* (1852–53)

to St. Rose, Kentucky, where he could be more closely supervised. His return to the priory did not solve his problems and in 1840 the Dominicans expelled him from their community.

Possibly his difficulties were psychological. His Dominican superior, Rev. Nicholas Young, O.P., described Alleman as "crazy at

Across the Mississippi and downriver from Alleman's first parish in Fort Madison, lay Nauvoo, Illinois, where he also served the few Catholics in this Mormon town of 20,000. The Mormon temple gleams in this idyllic lithograph. After the Mormons departed in 1846, Alleman is said to have hauled loads of stone from their abandoned quarries and temple across the frozen river to Fort Madison.



HENRY LEWIS, *DAS ILLUSTRIRTE MISSISSIPPITHAL* (1854–57)

Catholic parishes in small settlements such as Keokuk (above) lacked resident priests and had to rely on visiting priests every five or six weeks. Keokuk was one of Alleman's stations; fortunately he could reach it by steamboat. Traveling to settlements not on the Mississippi was slow, rough, and unpredictable.

times." Young, it should be understood, was part of the problem. He was, according to one writer, "a determined and exacting superior." Unfortunately, almost all of the information we have concerning Alleman's difficulties in this period comes from the pen of Young. Since Alleman suffered from psychological troubles late in his life, perhaps we can assume that certain traits, which were always present in his personality, came to the surface because of his troubles with Young.

His rejection by the Dominicans in 1840 did not weaken Alleman's resolve to follow his priestly vocation, now as a secular priest no longer under the rule of a religious order. But where was he to go? Alleman's response was that of many Americans of that day who turned westward. The place Alleman chose to start his new life was in the diocese of Dubuque, newly established in frontier Iowa Territory.

REV. SAMUEL MAZZUCHELLI, O.P., may have had something to do with Alleman's decision. In 1835 the youthful Mazzuchelli, already an experienced and successful missionary, visited with his Dominican brothers in Ohio. Perhaps in the course of this short stay, he met the newly ordained Alleman. Mazzuchelli may have been aware of Alleman's situation, having himself crossed swords with the intractable Young. Mathias Loras, the bishop of Dubuque, would never have accepted into his diocese a priest deemed unfit by the Dominicans unless Mazzuchelli vouched for him. Nor would the sensible Mazzuchelli have recommended Alleman to Loras if there were any questions as to his mental stability and priestly ability to perform his duties.

The diocese that Alleman joined in 1841 was huge, covering most of the present states of

Iowa and Minnesota, stretching from the Mississippi to the Missouri. Established just a few years earlier, it was truly a frontier diocese. Only eight priests were available to serve this vast region, and when Bishop Loras had arrived in 1839, he had found only three churches ready to greet him. The population consisted mostly of scattered Indian tribes, fur traders, and soldiers. Only in the eastern part of Iowa Territory were there small towns with Irish and German Catholics as a part of their populations.

Bishop Loras desperately needed priests, especially a German-speaking one. Aside from the Italian Mazzuchelli, the Dubuque clergy were all French. With each passing day more Germans settled in the diocese. These new arrivals were particularly numerous in Lee County, Iowa, on the southeastern border of the diocese. Unable to do much for these people because of the language barrier, Loras apparently had arranged with St. Louis bishop Joseph Rosati for a German-speaking priest from St. Louis to minister to the Catholics of Lee County. (In return, Loras would serve Galena, Illinois, some fifteen miles east of Dubuque and part of Rosati's diocese.) Now, with the addition of Alleman to the roster of the Dubuque clergy, Loras had the means of serving the German-speaking Catholics in his own diocese.

We can assume that Loras kept his new recruit in Dubuque for some time before assigning him to a parish. The bishop was a careful, precise man who would want to assess Alleman, despite Father Mazzuchelli's affirmation. Alleman apparently passed the test and, in 1841, Loras appointed him pastor for Fort Madison, Iowa Territory.

When Alleman arrived at his post in 1841, he found a crude frontier town in an area officially open to European-American settlement for only eight years. As such, Fort Madison shared the inconvenience, impermanence, and disorder common to places with no roots and few traditions. Still, as he disembarked on the steamboat landing at Fort Madison, Alleman must have been pleased by the natural beauty of the hills surrounding the town and the green islands dotting the Mississippi River.

The town itself, however, was not so attractive. Aside from a few large brick buildings, most of the structures were little more than wooden shanties. When it rained the streets became impassable seas of mud. Livestock roamed the streets, and carcasses lay here and there. Drunkenness and violence were commonplace. Perhaps fittingly, on the eastern edge of the town stood the Iowa Territorial Prison.

ALLEMAN FOUND that Loras had already purchased lots in the center of the town, perhaps for a church building and as a general investment. Aside from this there was nothing else in the way of a parish: no organized congregation, no money, no church, school, or rectory. Taking up residence in the home of the John Schwartz family (one of the eight Catholic families who had awaited Alleman), Alleman immediately began the construction of a small, brick church — St. Joseph's — on the lots Loras had bought.

Thirteen by eighteen feet, the church was too small even before the first Mass was celebrated in it. More Catholics were settling in the town because of the presence of a priest and now a church. By 1844 Alleman could report to the bishop that since his arrival in 1841 he had baptized eighty-eight children, married five couples, and buried five persons. As these figures illustrate, the congregation of St. Joseph's comprised mostly young married couples raising their children. The congregation continued to grow; in 1851, it included over a hundred families.

We can assume that the inadequate first church reflected the limited resources available to Alleman. Perhaps newly arrived parishioners, faced with the rigors of frontier life and the daily needs of their families, had little money and labor to contribute to their pastor. Whatever the reasons for constructing such a tiny church, as soon as he completed the first St. Joseph's, Alleman immediately had to commit time and money toward a second and larger church.

Alleman also hoped to build a school and a

rectory. Meanwhile, he taught the children catechism in the church. It does not appear that a rectory stood high in his priorities, for he never broke ground for such a building. In the absence of a house, Alleman lived in the church basement, first in the constricted space of the first St. Joseph's and in 1847 in the roomier, second church. In both circumstances Alleman's living space was dark and dank, particularly uncomfortable in the cold of a midwestern winter. With limited cooking facilities, the priest boarded out all of his years in Fort Madison, either at a parishioner's home or a boardinghouse.



In the 1840s Bishop Mathias Loras (above) had only a handful of priests for the scattered parishes and stations in his enormous frontier diocese. Expecting much of his priests, he accomplished much himself; he recruited thousands of Catholics to Iowa. No image of Father John Alleman appears to exist.

HIS MEAGER POSSESSIONS — a few books, a change of clothes — fit easily in his cramped basement room. He is commonly portrayed as one who owned little and shared all. A Lee County history, for instance, written a few years after Alleman's death, described him as "a generous, kind-hearted man, willing at any time to divide his last farthing with anyone needing assistance."

Frontier priests generally engaged in physical labor, often helping build the actual church structures. It is likely that Alleman, who led his parishes by example, worked side-by-side with parishioners in building the two Fort Madison churches. He purchased building materials as well, storing thousands of bricks in the churchyard. One winter he hauled over a hundred loads of stone across the frozen river from the abandoned Mormon quarries at Nauvoo. He also obtained cut stone from the burnt-out Mormon Temple there. On many fall days, Alleman could be found on an island in the Mississippi cutting firewood for the church.

Perhaps as a respite from such back-breaking labor, Alleman cultivated flowers, fruits, and vegetables, and shared them with his parishioners. He enjoyed trying to develop new strains of plants; it is claimed that he produced a new rose, named "The Alleman Rose." His gardening forged a tie with his bishop; Loras also was a gardener and Alleman often shipped upriver young shoots and other produce of his labors.

Bishop Loras was a man of rules who demanded that his priests follow a way of life befitting their religious vocation. Loras strongly advocated temperance for both his priests and his people. Father Alleman, the priest who could not get along with his Dominican superiors, dutifully followed the wishes of Bishop Loras. Alleman helped organize a Lee County temperance society, at a time when frontier drunkenness was rampant.

Likewise, Loras insisted that his clergy appear in public in clerical garb. So it was that the huge figure of Father Alleman appeared often on the streets of Fort Madison in a long, black robe and a broad-brimmed hat. No doubt many who saw him hurrying down the street, dressed entirely in black, perhaps carrying a bouquet of flowers, remembered the scene for

many years. Such an image is indeed the stuff out of which legends are made.

WHEN ALLEMAN accepted the pastorate for Fort Madison, he also accepted responsibility for all of Lee County. He was pastor of St. Joseph's in Fort Madison, with "stations" at Keokuk, West Point, Sugar Creek (today St. Paul), and Farmington. These stations were parishes without a resident pastor and therefore unable to celebrate the fundamental Catholic worship, that of the Mass, without relying on nearby or visiting priests such as Alleman. Because of Alleman's heavy schedule, he was able to visit these stations only every five or six weeks.

Traveling to and from communities on the Mississippi was relatively easy for Alleman. Fort Madison had easy access to other river towns. Dubuque was 150 miles upriver by steamboat; Keokuk was only 20 miles downriver. But aside from Keokuk, Alleman's other stations could only be reached by overland travel — slow, arduous, at times dangerous. West Point was nearly 15 miles from Fort Madison, with Sugar Creek another 5, and Farmington even further. Roads were little more than wagon tracks, muddy in the spring, dusty in the summer, and frozen in the winter. Bridges did not exist; a traveler crossed streams by ferry or by fording. This last method could be dangerous, especially when rivers and creeks ran high. Alleman once wrote matter-of-factly to Loras that he had nearly drowned while fording the Skunk River on his way from Fort Madison to Burlington.

Legend has it that Father Alleman, saddlebags over his shoulders, traveled by foot to his far-flung stations. This seems unlikely; even a man of Alleman's strength and vigor would find it difficult to walk fifteen or twenty miles across frontier terrain on a regular basis. Certainly on occasion he did walk to his destination; just as certainly, he often went by horse. In a letter to Loras, Alleman makes this clear: "I was called to St. James (Sugar Creek) for a burial and came on foot having no place to keep my horse there."

His travels were not confined to Lee County. More than a hundred miles northwest of Fort Madison lay Iowa City, the territorial capital. Its Catholic church included many Germans. Alleman, still the only priest in the diocese with a command of the German language, disliked greatly the long journey to Iowa City, but, obeying Loras's order, he traveled there several times each year, and stopped also for a nearby German congregation on the English River (near the present town of Riverside).

At times Loras used Alleman to minister to German parishes relatively close to Dubuque itself. Baptismal and marriage records inform us that Alleman performed these rites in Sherrill, some ten miles north of Dubuque, and at New Vienna, some twenty-five miles west.

IN 1844 IT APPEARED that Alleman would receive some relief from the constant travel. Father Lucien Galtier was appointed pastor of Keokuk, with Farmington as a station also under his care. Galtier was not untested as a frontier priest, yet his subsequent responses to this appointment reveal more of the challenges facing frontier priests such as Alleman. Galtier had come to America with Loras in 1838, and his first assignment had been a difficult one. Loras had chosen him to establish the Catholic church in the wilds of Minnesota. Galtier had built a small, wooden chapel above the Falls of St. Anthony, which he named St. Paul. For four years the young priest served a congregation of fur traders, French-Indians, and soldiers from nearby Fort Snelling.

These years in the Minnesota wilderness had broken young Galtier's spirit. From his first days in Keokuk, Iowa Territory, he bombarded Loras with complaints. Keokuk, he wrote his bishop, was the worst place to station a priest. Only a few Catholics resided there, and these were lukewarm in their commitment. He bemoaned the privations that he endured —

his home a wooden shanty, his diet meager and unsatisfactory. Although Loras sent his builder, Hugh Gildea, to construct a church, the pastor was expected to assist. Galtier wrote bitterly of this; he had not come to America to do the dirty work of a carpenter but to be a priest and to do priestly service. He also expressed dismay over the absence of other priests, from whom he could receive emotional and spiritual consolation.

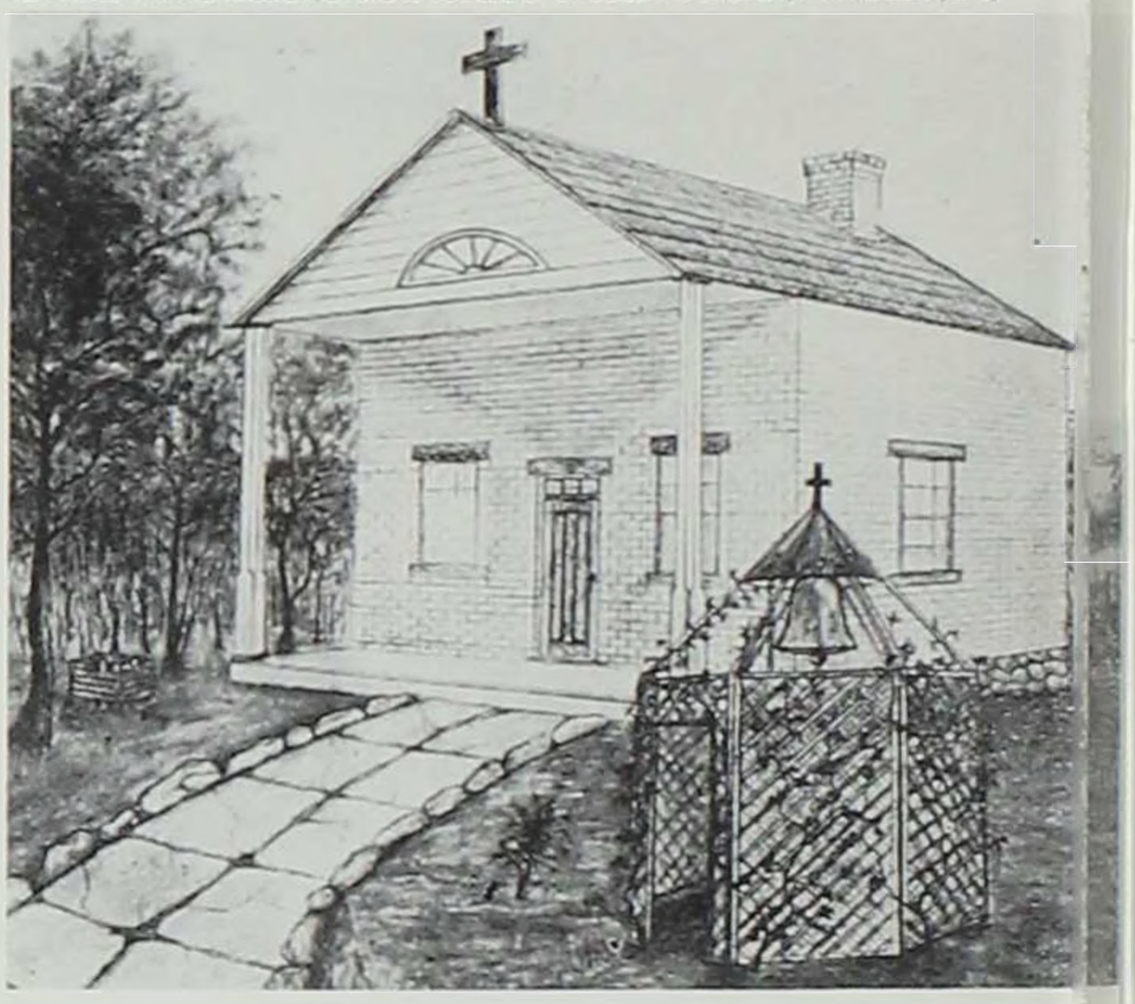
Galtier finally admitted that he did not want to be a pastor under the conditions that Alleman had faced. He asked the bishop for permission to transfer out. Thus after some six months of struggle, Galtier left the Dubuque diocese. Although Loras granted him the transfer, he did not offer much sympathy. What he demanded of his priests was no worse than what other frontier pastors endured.

Galtier's defection in 1845 meant that Alleman was again responsible for Keokuk and Farmington. Then, in 1846, the pastorate at Burlington, some twenty miles upriver from Fort Madison, became vacant. With still only eight priests on the diocesan roll — no more than in 1841 — Loras had no choice but to add Burlington and the settlements of Dodgeville and Augusta to Alleman's responsibilities.

By now Alleman was clearly feeling the burden of travel, as illustrated by an episode with the Sugar Creek congregation. The Catholics at Sugar Creek had built the first Catholic church in Lee County. Even before the arrival of Bishop Loras in 1839, the spire of St. James had graced the surrounding landscape. Naturally, the congregation had wanted a priest for their church. Just as naturally, Alleman disliked traveling the additional five miles from West Point to Sugar Creek, and back again. He now refused to visit Sugar Creek, much to the chagrin of the St. James parishioners. A quarrel ensued, but Alleman refused to give in, removing St. James from his itinerary and insisting that its parishioners were a part of the West Point parish — and should therefore travel to West Point to worship.

Finally, Alleman obtained some relief with an influx of priests into the diocese, one each to serve at Burlington, Keokuk, and West Point. By 1851, Alleman would serve as the pastor of only St. Joseph's Church in Fort Madison.

REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION; *DIAMOND JUBILEE OF ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH, FT. MADISON* (1915)



Building a church for Fort Madison's eight Catholic families was one of Alleman's first actions upon arrival in 1841. Faced with limited resources, Alleman built a small structure — only 13 × 18 feet (shown here in a 1913 drawing). According to a church history, Alleman received the bell from a steamboat captain and hung it in the grape arbor.

WHILE CIRCUMSTANCES and duty united to make Alleman's life difficult as a frontier priest, his ecclesiastical superior also added to his woes. In seeking to establish the Catholic church firmly in the soil of Iowa Territory, the zealous Bishop Loras expected much from his priests. To his credit, he also demanded much of himself. He, too, traveled far and often; a few years before his death, already a man in his sixties, Loras made a journey by horse and buggy to Fort Dodge, Iowa, a round trip of nearly four hundred miles. Yet despite the example he set of asceticism and dedication, Loras was not a particularly successful director of his clergy, principally because of his close-fisted handling of money.

The son of a wealthy, mercantile family of Lyon, France, Loras often seemed to view his diocese as a business enterprise. He watched every penny, while investing funds (often from European missionary societies, such as The Society for the Propagation of the Faith) in long-range capital investments. Thus, he was able to purchase thousands of acres of public

land in Dubuque County. He also owned a block of buildings in Dubuque and in Davenport, a store in Burlington, and city lots in Fort Madison. Certainly this was not all ill-advised. When, in 1849, a group of Irish Trappist monks sought to found a monastery in America, Loras persuaded them to settle in Dubuque County by offering them the gift of nearly four hundred acres of prairie land.

Regarding parishes and priests, Loras's policy was to supply seed money to a parish. But as soon as possible the parish was encouraged to stand on its own. Loras and his priests had agreed at an 1840 synod that the diocese would pay each priest ten dollars a month; if this failed to meet the pastor's needs, the parish would have to supply what was lacking. Often the members of new parishes had barely enough to survive. If a parish had to borrow money to build a church, Bishop Loras held the pastor responsible for the debt.

Most priests under Loras were not very accommodating of his miserliness. Father Alexander Hattenberger, Alleman's successor at Fort Madison, would write Loras in strong language demanding greater financial assistance. Other clergymen took the more drastic step of leaving the diocese (one of the reasons Loras had trouble increasing the number of priests on his roster).

Like many priests, Alleman found himself caught between a penurious bishop and an impecunious parish. Acumen in money matters was not one of his strengths. Nor did his ascetic way of life sharpen his financial sense. And yet everywhere he looked there was the need to build, to expand, to spend.

LORAS, apparently, had little confidence in Alleman's financial skills. Once when Alleman asked for help, Loras insisted that the pastor send him an itemized account of his expenses. Always dutiful, Alleman sent the bishop a list of his expenditures, which included one dollar for new glasses. In response, Loras ordered Alleman to sell the bricks he had accumulated for church construction in Fort Madison, presumably because of the debt incurred in purchasing them.

In his first years in Fort Madison, Alleman had accepted without complaint his bishop's criticisms and demands. Indeed, on one occasion in 1844 he actually apologized to Loras over the debts incurred: "I feel very much afflicted to see your Lordship so much and so many times inquiring for my debts, and positively I shall depend upon my efforts alone to pay them."

At times, Loras apparently neglected to pay the ten-dollar monthly stipend to his priest. In 1844 Alleman had written the bishop that he could meet his financial obligations "if your Lordship would allow me the $10 a month according to the rules of the diocese." Finally, a January 1847 letter to Loras shows that Alleman had reached his limit. "Your letter bothered me more than anything in my life," Alleman wrote. "As far as my debts, everything is fine unless I was a fool for having built churches and organized good property for them."

IN THAT YEAR, Alleman's financial problems came to a head. He was finishing the second St. Joseph's Church in Fort Madison; a rectory and a schoolhouse awaited the necessary funds to become realities. In West Point, church construction was under way. Alleman fell into debt at both places, enough to arouse the bishop's ire. Concluding that the parishioners, particularly those at West Point, were negligent in financially supporting Alleman, Loras took the drastic step of recalling Alleman to Dubuque — leaving Lee County without a priest.

As Loras intended, this brought forth a quick response. A West Point physician, Daniel Lowry, wrote to Alleman, asking him what the people at West Point could do to restore a priest to their locale. Alleman was now at St. Patrick's in Garryowen, an entirely Irish parish near Dubuque. Alleman responded that West Point must pay the money owed on the church and must also promise Loras that it would provide support for any priest who served the parish. He ended the letter on a plaintive note, telling Lowry that he would "hate to see my work destroyed."

Lowry, following Alleman's advice, then



REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION: *DIAMOND JUBILEE OF ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH, FT. MADISON* (1915)

By 1847, sixty-seven more Catholic families had settled in Fort Madison, and Alleman had completed construction of this second, larger St. Joseph's Church. Alleman never built a rectory; he lived in the church basement and boarded out.

wrote Loras, assuring the bishop that the parish would meet the conditions necessary to restore a priest. Lowry, however, also emphasized that the parishioners were not eager to contribute money when a priest came among them only once in every five or six weeks. Lowry promised that the parish could easily pay off the debt, a tacit admission that the West Point people could have contributed more if they had so wished. The doctor also promised that any priest who came to West Point would be provided for sufficiently; he personally would supply room and board if necessary. With these assurances in hand, Loras agreed to return Alleman to Lee County.

EXACTLY HOW LONG Alleman remained away from his southeast Iowa parishes is unclear, but his own actions during this financial crisis show a new desperation. He engaged a lawyer to sue the Dominicans to obtain payment for the six years he had given to them in Ohio and Kentucky as a priest in their order. Yet he had little chance of winning the suit because he had taken a vow of poverty and obedience and had voluntarily undertaken the work. Even if the suit had no merit, it signals how distraught he was over his financial difficulties.

Father Young, Alleman's old adversary in Kentucky, informed Bishop Loras of the priest's legal actions. Young's letter was vituperative, describing Alleman in the harshest terms. (Whatever were Young's virtues, forgiveness was not one of them.) Loras immediately ordered Alleman to drop the law suit and promised that he would pay off Alleman's debts if the priest agreed to avoid indebtedness in the future.

Although Alleman's situation improved, he continued to have money problems to some degree. In late 1847, after his return to Lee County, he wrote to Loras, "I am doing very well and would be better if your Lordship would open his purse strings." In 1849 Alleman would write again to inform the bishop that his financial difficulties had not ended.

Alleman's financial crisis of 1847 was the nadir of his pastorate in Lee County. Late that year, Alleman celebrated Mass in the larger St. Joseph's Church, though it was still under construction. Furthermore, Alleman received some recognition for his labors. Bishop Loras, not one to lavish praise, publicly acknowledged the priest's role in the building of the new

church. He wrote in *The Catholic Almanac* of 1848: "Fort Madison, Lee County, St. Joseph. A neat brick church has just been completed in the very center of the town through the exertions of Rev. J. G. Alleman who officiates there and preaches in German and English." Meager praise, no doubt, but surely rewarding to one who had received little in the way of acknowledgement in his fourteen years as a priest.

BY 1851, ALLEMAN'S responsibilities had been lightened. He now served only St. Joseph's. Yet he only briefly enjoyed the reduced duties of a pastor with a single parish. That year he transferred from the Dubuque diocese to the Chicago diocese, becoming now a pastor for western Illinois along the Mississippi.

Once again the historical record fails us by providing no plausible reason for this surprising change. Perhaps Loras now possessed sufficient clergy to allow him to surrender Alleman and his fluency in German to a diocese that had greater need for such a priest. From what we know of Loras, this seems unlikely. Another possibility is that Alleman, tired of the penny-pinching Loras, initiated the transfer himself. One might also conjecture that Alleman's failing health necessitated the transfer. Years of service, incessant travel, and financial anxiety had demanded their price. Although he was only forty-seven in 1851, he had already been referred to as "the old priest" by Father George Reffe, the pastor of Burlington two years earlier. But this last explanation is the least likely, because Alleman again shouldered manifold burdens in this more demanding post. He was now responsible for Rock Island, Moline, and nearby stations, and for Nauvoo and a station in Warsaw.

Furthermore, Alleman apparently remained involved with Fort Madison's church, despite the transfer. In *The Catholic Almanac* for 1852 Loras reported: "Fort Madison, Lee County, a fine town on the Mississippi. St. Joseph's. Several lots were bought by the Bishop of the diocese for the location of the church and garden for the priest. Lots have been purchased and the foundations of a house laid for the sisters of Charity. Rev. J. Alleman visits the church from Rock Island on the 2nd (Sunday) of each month and the Rev. Mathias Michels from West Point on the fourth (Sunday). Sermons chiefly in German."

Alleman actually spent most of this first year of his Illinois assignment in Nauvoo rather than Rock Island. He had a long-time connection with Nauvoo, having served the Catholics there since his arrival in Fort Madison. Although Nauvoo was not in the Dubuque diocese, its proximity to Fort Madison, just across the river, inevitably resulted in Alleman becoming involved with them. One source, in fact, claims that in the early 1840s Alleman had escaped the enmity and hatred existing between Mormons in Nauvoo and non-Mormons, and had developed instead a relationship of mutual respect and admiration with the Mormon leader Joseph Smith. According to this source, Smith even loaned his personal boat to Catholics around Nauvoo who wanted to cross the Mississippi to seek out Father Alleman. While all of this appears implausible considering the bitter feelings between Mormons and Catholics, it remains part of the legend of Father John Alleman.

About this time he helped purchase the former home of Mormon leader Parley Pratt, to be used as a Catholic church, rectory, and school in Nauvoo. According to the baptismal record, Alleman baptized eighteen children in the town between June 1851 and June 1852, apparently residing there through the winter. In 1852, his position at Nauvoo and Warsaw ended when a permanent, full-time pastor was appointed.

ALLEMAN'S attention shifted next to Rock Island. If the pastorship of Rock Island had been intended as a sinecure for Alleman, it was anything but that. As in Fort Madison, the priest had to locate the Catholics in the area, organize the parish, raise money, and build a church and eventually a school and rectory. And again, he found himself short of money. Consequently, although the cornerstone for St. James Church (later St. Mary's) was laid in August 1851, the church was not completed for another two years.

From the beginning, he faced the tasks of

serving a rapidly growing parish. St. James records for 1851 show 18 baptisms and 4 marriages. Five years later, in 1856, the numbers had grown to 169 baptisms and 54 marriages. At this point the beleaguered Alleman received assistance, as the Rev. John Donelon joined him.

In the years that followed, his labors finally did diminish. In his last year there, 1862, the records show that he baptized only four children. That same year he transferred again, this time to Collinsville, Illinois, in the Alton diocese, presumably so that his ill health could be treated better at a Catholic hospital in nearby St. Louis.

ON NOVEMBER 16, 1863, Alleman entered St. Vincent's Sanatorium in St. Louis, where he died on July 24, 1865. St. Vincent's listed the cause of death as "Melancholia" — or as we would describe it today, depression.

It would appear that Alleman had suffered from depression and its companion, reclusiveness, for some time. Patrick Lee, a member of the St. James parish in Rock Island who had assisted Alleman in his duties, later described the priest as "a very peculiar man" who "lived a very secluded life and lived much to himself." He had become "morose and difficult to approach and was at last induced to go to a hospital," later wrote Father J. B. Culemans.

Can we assume that the reclusive traits in his personality were behind his early failure as a Dominican in Ohio and Kentucky? An order such as the Dominicans, which provided many frontier missionary priests, would have had no place for a recluse. On the other hand, there is little to suggest that Alleman displayed reclusive tendencies while at Fort Madison.

In fact, certain accounts suggest a stable, even gregarious personality. In a December 1847 letter to Loras, Alleman wrote of staying overnight at the home of a man named Moffitt in Augusta, Iowa: "Had church at Mr. Moffitt's and cheery it was to have such good company, especially the excellent Mrs. Moffitt." Furthermore, Alleman's practice for ten years in Fort Madison of eating his principal meal either with various families or with strangers in a boardinghouse, rather than alone in his living quarters, suggests a man who preferred the company of others.

In another instance, Philip Laurent, a priest in the Dubuque diocese in the 1850s, pictured Alleman as having a friendly personality. "In his frequent missionary journeys," Laurent related, "Father Alleman made use whenever possible of the only fast means of travel in that day, the steamboat. He never had money to pay his fare. But fortunately, every steamboat captain of the upper river knew the good priest of Fort Madison and esteemed his friendship."

The Rev. John Kempker, a later successor of Alleman and the first historian of the Catholic church in Iowa, had these insights: "Father Alleman was an exceedingly pious, and saintly and zealous man. But he had some eccentricities; and in addition to these he really possessed, he was given credit for much more than he really deserved in that direction, little or no allowance being made for the hardship, infirmities and unavoidable defects which naturally had to come to one enduring his privations."

Alleman's eventual breakdown more likely resulted from excessive labor, travel, and heavy responsibilities than from a reclusive nature. To balance the legendary portrayals of Alleman — both the hard-working ascetic and the peculiar reclusive — one must consider the historical evidence offered here, from church records and correspondence between Loras, Alleman, and other priests. In the harsh light of frontier Iowa, these sources reveal the challenges faced by frontier clergy. Accepting Father Alleman as a fallible human — not as a legend — not only maximizes his accomplishments in these demanding circumstances, but provides a detailed and candid portrait of a frontier priest in mid-nineteenth-century Iowa and Illinois. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Principal primary sources for this essay include the unpublished letters of Rev. John Alleman to Bishop Mathias Loras, and the Annual Reports of Alleman and other pastors (Archives of the Archdiocese of Dubuque, Dubuque, Iowa). Major secondary sources include *The Catholic Almanac* (annual reports of the bishops of the United States); J. B. Culemans, "A Great Illinois Pioneer — the Rev. John George Alleman," *The Illinois Catholic Historical Review*, vol. 2 (1919/20), pp. 208–22; Sister Mary Jean Ellen Shields, BVM, "Father John Alleman" (master's thesis, St. Louis University, 1954); and Rev. Arthur Zaiser, *The Diamond Jubilee of St. Joseph's Parish, Fort Madison, Iowa* (Techney, Ill., 1915).