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Willson Alexander Scott

In the spring of 1843 Captain James Allen with a company of United States Dragoons moved westward from Fort Sanford to the juncture of the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers. There they erected a fort and such other buildings as were needed. The task assigned to them was that of protecting the Sauk and Fox Indians against the incursions of white settlers until the fall of 1845, when the treaty signed in 1842 required that the Indians give up their hunting grounds in Iowa.

Food for the men and provender for the horses must necessarily be produced in the local area or obtained through purchase or barter, and a few artisans, traders, and farmers were needed. In this capacity a number of white civilians were permitted to reside within the limits of Fort Des Moines or in the vicinity nearby. Willson Alexander Scott and his cousin, John B. Scott, were among the favored few who obtained these special

permits to establish farms within the Indian country, provided they raised corn, hay, and other farm products to supply the garrison. The gardens of the soldiers lay along the north and south banks of the Raccoon River and the civilian settlement was located on the east side of the Des Moines River. There the Scott cousins — "Aleck" and J. B. — erected a log trading post and carried on an extensive trade with the Indians.

Aleck Scott, as he was usually called, was one of the men who made a real contribution to the history of Iowa. When Fort Des Moines was established, he was twenty-five years of age, for he was born in Crawford County, Indiana, on November 20, 1818. His family, like many others, rested in Indiana on the way from Virginia to Illinois. As a youth, Willson Alexander Scott lived amid pioneer surroundings and his early education was obtained in the schoolhouse on his father's farm in Illinois. He may have attended Illinois College at Jacksonville, Illinois, for a brief time. Somewhere along the way, at any rate, he studied higher mathematics and surveying, and he was interested for a time in the practical problems of civil engineering. Possessed by the spirit of adventure and the love of pioneer life, young Scott migrated to Iowa in 1841. Pausing for a season in Jefferson County, he soon moved on westward and thus be-

came one of the first settlers at the present site of Des Moines.

Scott carried on his activities as a trader and farmer, serving both the garrison and the Indians, until the Sauk and Fox began their reluctant withdrawal to their new lands in Kansas in 1845. Then he moved with them in the capacity of a trader; but his sojourn in Kansas was very brief. When the garrison vacated Fort Des Moines on March 10, 1846, Scott knew that settlers would soon be permitted to purchase lands in that vicinity. He returned to the junction of the Raccoon and Des Moines rivers and purchased five hundred acres on the east bank of the Des Moines River. Later this land came to be "the principal part of the East Side of the City of Des Moines", including a major part of the present State Capitol grounds. Just south of what is now Capitol Hill, Mr. Scott built a double log cabin, consisting of "two log houses, one serving as a dwelling and the other as a stable, with a roofed space connecting them, used as a shelter for wagons, machinery, etc."

As the town of Fort Des Moines developed at the former site of the fort, west of the Des Moines River, settlers located on both sides of the river, and as migration increased from east to west across Iowa, facilities for crossing the Des Moines

River became essential and John B. Scott commenced operating the first ferry across the river on May 1, 1846. It is also recorded that "Aleck Scott put on a flatboat ferry in 1846 and did a profitable business."

Farming and ferrying, however, did not exhaust the energies of this sturdy pioneer. In January, 1847, the board of county commissioners began to plan for the erection of a courthouse and, after various plans had been considered and rejected, specifications for a two-story brick building were agreed upon. Bids were advertised for and it was ordered that the contract be let at the January, 1848, meeting. Scott was among those who presented bids. Although his bid was not accepted, it is indicative of his building and property interests.

In 1847, Scott was given a license by the Polk County commissioners to operate a ferry across both the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers. It is said that the license was validated by the imprint of a half-dollar because the county had no official seal.

When the town of Fort Des Moines was incorporated in 1851 the council sought ways and means of increasing its revenue but, as one writer stated, the "ways were many but the means were few." The ferry committee of the council wanted

to impose a license fee on Mr. Scott. Scott, however, contended that he had a perpetual commission to run the ferry, given him by old Chief Keokuk, and if this right were lost, he contended, it did not thereby go to the newly established town.

The town council then sought to build a foot-bridge across the river, but there was objection to this on the ground that it would interfere with water transportation on the river. At length a compromise was reached by which it was agreed that Scott should continue to operate his ferry over both the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers, but that doctors and the mails should be carried free.

When the ferry was first established the rates of toll were very reasonable — footman, 5 cents; horseman, $12\frac{1}{2}$ cents; wagon and "span of horses", $37\frac{1}{2}$ cents. During the days of the rush of emigrants to California and the gold fields, however, the ferryman was busy and toll rates were increased. It is reported that there were occasions when six hundred horses and as many people were ferried across the river in a single day. After he had operated a ferry for two years Scott built a floating toll bridge at what later came to be called the Grand Avenue crossing. This did not prove a success; it was too long when the river was low and too short during the high water season. Scott therefore continued to operate his

ferries for several years. Later he built a trestle bridge over the Des Moines at Market Street.

But Scott was more than a ferryman and a builder of bridges. He had many other interests and activities. When early settlers came into the Polk County area in considerable numbers, it was necessary to form a claim association to protect themselves against speculators. Willson Alexander Scott was one of the first men to sign a resolution to form such an association. In 1849 Asa Flemming and B. Perkins, both members of the Association, claimed title to the same piece of land. One day, when Perkins, the contesting claimant, was found near the Flemming claim, he was shot and wounded. He fled to Fort Des Moines where he swore out a warrant for Flemming. When the settlers heard that Flemming had been arrested, an armed and threatening mob formed south of the Raccoon River to obtain his release and applied to Aleck Scott to transport them across the river. Scott, however, refused to do so until their guns were stacked and other weapons removed. Thus it appears that a serious riot may have been averted by the sagacious and resolute ferryman.

Scott apparently continued to live in his double log cabin south of Capitol Hill until 1849. In that year he launched out more widely in the real estate business. On November 2, 1849, the *Iowa*

Star reported that "Messrs. Buckingham, Dean and Scott commenced the survey of their addition to Fort Des Moines today. This addition is on the east bank of the Des Moines River directly opposite town, and well situated for business. We learn the lots will be in market soon."

The town of Fort Des Moines (later named Des Moines) was originally platted on July 8, 1846. The Scott and Dean addition, east of the river, seems to have been the first addition to the original plat, and was recorded on November 19, 1849. The plat of the addition and the filing agreement were signed by W. A. Scott and Luesa (Louisa) Scott, his wife, and by John S. Dean and Nancy Dean, his wife.

Some time prior to this date Mr. Scott had married Mrs. Luesa Jayne, the widow of an Indian interpreter and friend. Mrs. Scott, of French and Indian parentage, was described as "an exceedingly attractive woman, a good housekeeper, and noted for her taste in dress." It was, however, reported that she had a strong appetite for "fire-water", and that, on occasions, she would put on full Indian regalia and take time out from her home duties to go on an extensive "spree", after which "she would resume her wifely duties in a very proper manner." There were, it seems, no children.

When Scott laid out his new addition in East Des Moines, he erected several dwellings, among them a large brick house, a combination residence and hotel, which came to be known as the "Scott House". Later it was known as the "Hawkeye" and still later, after Scott's day, as the "Refuge of Sin". He also laid off his land into town lots which he sold at a substantial profit.

During the busy years of the gold rush Scott traded extensively with emigrants, organized and equipped various emigrant groups, and is thought to have made two trips to California. In April, 1850, Scott's brother, C. L. Scott, passed through Fort Des Moines, on his way to California. When he arrived at Fort Des Moines he found that grain was selling for from \$1.50 to \$2.00 per bushel. Luckily for him, he had previously written to "Alex" to purchase grain for him, which he had done, paying 35 cents per bushel. The brother reported that he "found Alex well and making from forty to fifty dollars per day."

Soon after Iowa was admitted into the Union as a State there was agitation for a removal of the capital from Iowa City to a more central location within the State, and in 1855 a law was passed which provided that the seat of government should be located "within two miles of the junction of the Des Moines and Racoon rivers in Polk county".

This gave rise to a contest to determine whether it should be located on the east or west side of the Des Moines River. Scott had laid out upwards of eight hundred lots on the east side which were selling from one hundred to three hundred dollars per lot. He believed that they would double in price in one year and that "they would more than do that" if the capitol were built on the east side of the river.

Residents on both sides of the Des Moines contended vigorously for the capitol site. Fort Des Moines and the settlers west of the river seemed to have the advantage. A donation of twenty acres of land, valued at nearly \$100,000, and the possibility of purchasing at a fair price other lands worth nearly \$200,000, were inducements offered by citizens living west of the river.

Members of the locating commission, however, favored a site east of the river, and on April 21, 1856, a tract of land containing a little more than ten acres, donated by Willson Alexander Scott and Harrison Logan, was selected as the site for the new capitol building. The location was described by Governor James W. Grimes as "a gentle swell of land about three quarters of a mile east of Fort Des Moines, and on the east side of the river. It commands a good prospect and seems to be well adapted to the purpose for which it has

been selected." This area is designated in the records as "Capitol Square" and is the site of the present State Capitol. Thomas K. Brooks and Willson A. Scott also conveyed five and sixty-one hundredths acres of land to the State of Iowa. This was located a little south and east of Capitol Square and was familiarly known as "Governor's Square".

To provide a building to be used as a capitol without cost to the State, Scott and a group of associates erected a temporary capitol building south of Capitol Square at a cost of \$37,000. Scott was one of the building contractors and contributed "the lion's share" in both labor and materials. When the building was completed it was leased to the State for an indefinite period "for the sum of one dollar per annum".

Scott, however, saw more than financial success in the site of Des Moines. He admired the beauty of his surroundings; he loved the lofty aspects of the hilltop and the broad views that it afforded. Standing with friends one day at a point not far from the site of the present State Capitol, looking across the rich valley of the Des Moines River, and viewing the wide expanse of his own broad acres, he said: "When I die I want to be buried here, where we stand." His wish was granted all too soon.

The first half of the decade of the fifties made Scott a prosperous and influential man, and he was widely known for his generosity. Indeed he was generous to a fault. When no capitol building was available, he set about to build one. When money was not available for removing the records from Iowa City to Des Moines, Scott agreed that the necessary "funds would be advanced" by interested citizens. When the General Assembly first convened in Des Moines, he entertained the members lavishly in his large brick house. When his sister was married he gave "a large and splendid party". To his nieces and nephews in Illinois he was known as the mysterious uncle in the West who sent beautiful toys, lovely hats and dresses, "also jewelry, — lockets, and necklaces, bracelets, rings and brooches made from nuggets he had brought from the mines of California". To his young sisters he sent "fine riding horses, and to his father many horses" — among others a valuable team of "matched grays".

But prosperity may vanish like a fleeting cloud. Early in 1857 Willson Alexander Scott reached the height of his prosperity. He was a large landowner, a prominent citizen, and had been elected to the city council at the election held on May 4th. But in the fall of that year hard times set in. His generosity in the building of a capitol and in donat-

ing liberally to every cause had seriously drained his resources and he had incurred obligations which endangered his property. Still a comparatively young man — scarcely forty — with the spirit of adventure strong within him, he joined an expedition leaving for the gold fields. Like all Argonauts, he hoped to regain his fortune and return to Iowa's capital city a rich man. As the party left Des Moines, in June, 1859, Scott jestingly remarked to his friends that he would "make a Fourth of July speech on Pike's Peak".

Alas, he did not reach his destination and he never retrieved his fortune. After a few days' illness on the plains of Nebraska on the way west, he died near Fort Kearney on June 23, 1859, despite the efforts of a surgeon from the Fort. Remembering his wish to be buried on Capitol Hill, at a point overlooking the wide valley of the Des Moines River, friends and relatives arranged for the return of his body to the capital city, and there, on November 1, 1859, it was interred in accordance with his request. Masons and Odd Fellows joined in honoring the memory of the pioneer member of both orders.

For many years Willson Alexander Scott rested in an unmarked grave. In 1884 citizens of Des Moines presented a petition to the General Assembly asking for an appropriation to fence the

lot and to provide a suitable monument, but no action was taken. In 1902, Henry Scott, of New York City, a nephew of the sturdy Iowa pioneer, came to Des Moines with plans for the erection of an elaborate granite monument to cost some \$30,000. But this project, likewise, failed to become a reality.

Year after year tributes were paid to Willson Alexander Scott, "Donor of the State House Grounds", year after year there was talk of building a monument, but no monument was erected. For a time a wooden fence surrounded the burial lot, but at length that disappeared. For a time a lonely tree shaded the grave, but eventually that, likewise, was removed. In 1913 a large boulder was placed at the grave by the Historical Department of Iowa. Finally, in 1923, the Fortieth General Assembly appropriated \$500 for a "suitable memorial monument".

A suitable marker provided by this appropriation was erected in 1925. It stands on a knoll on the Capitol grounds and engraved on the marker is a brief biography of Willson Alexander Scott "who gave to the state of Iowa the greater part of the land where stands the capitol". The account concludes with the statement that his body "was here interred in earth which, as his homestead, had been exempted from seizure for his debts."

Scott was a sturdy pioneer, who builded better than he knew. He gave generously; but, in a sense, he retained what he gave away. Although he died a poor man and his grave was unmarked for many years, he is not forgotten. His early contributions to Iowa remain always his rich heritage and his grave on the crest of Capitol Hill is today an honored spot. Above it rises the dome of the State Capitol he envisioned, around it lies a great city he helped to locate. What greater monument could a man ask?

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