

# THE PALIMPSEST

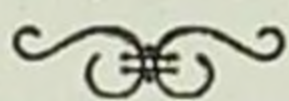
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## In the Beginning

Iowa was in a history-making mood in 1857. The Sixth General Assembly was in session in Iowa City grinding out its usual quota of laws. The Iowa Supreme Court was rendering decisions of far-reaching importance that year. Finally, a constitutional convention met in Iowa City and supplanted the Constitution of 1846 with the Constitution of 1857, a document destined to serve the people of Iowa for more than a century.

If history seemed to be in the making in 1857 it should be pointed out that giant strides had been taken since the first spray of settlement fell in the Black Hawk Purchase on June 1, 1833. The region had been attached to Michigan Territory in 1834, formed a part of Wisconsin Territory in 1836, became the Territory of Iowa in 1838, and achieved statehood in 1846. Between 1833 and 1850 population increased from 0 to 192,000; during the Fabulous Fifties it zoomed from 324,401 in 1854 to 417,875 in 1856, a gain of 193,474 in two years. Truly, a young giant was in the mak-

ing west of the Mississippi. Little wonder that the principal actors in the drama should envision the need of an historical agency to record the story.

The first man to conceive the idea of an Iowa Historical Society was James Clarke of Burlington, a native of Pennsylvania and the owner of the *Iowa Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser*. On September 22, 1838, Clarke editorialized as follows:

To the formation of Historical Societies in the various states of the union we are greatly indebted for much of the knowledge we possess on the subject of the early settlement of our common country; and had associations of this kind been commenced at an earlier day, we should have been in the possession of much more. Almost every state of the union can now boast of its Historical Society, each of which is diligently and successfully striving to make the people better acquainted with the history and resources of the state in which they reside. Why, then, we have often asked ourselves, is Iowa without one? Surely her citizens cannot be indifferent to the subject. Our territory, it is true, is yet in its swaddling clothes, and cannot be expected to emulate her grown up sisters in fostering and encouraging the culture of the sciences and arts; but we are, on this very account, the better qualified to snatch from the "stagnant oblivious pool" which must otherwise necessarily engulf it, the history of the settlement, cultivation and resources, of this region of forests, and lakes, and prairies, as well as the expulsions of those "stoics of the wood," the red men, from it. There are those among us who know all of this by heart — "all of which they saw, and part of which they were;" but unless some measures are soon taken to collect and pre-

serve it, and put it in proper shape, it will soon pass from us. To do this would be the province of a Historical Society. What is fact to-day will be tradition to-morrow, and the next day it will be entirely forgot.

The organizing of a society of the kind to which we refer, in this town, would, we are firmly persuaded, be productive of good results. When we reflect that three different sovereignties have at different times claimed our allegiance — that our flag has changed five times — that before we obtained a foothold on the soil, we had to contend with the primitive people around us — that since that time, emigration has poured in upon us like the waves of the ocean — who, we say, after reflecting upon these things, will say we have no history to write — nothing worth preserving? There are stories connected with this part of the Louisiana purchase, of thrilling interest; and we are desirous and esteem it a duty we owe as well to ourselves as to our posterity, to collect and preserve them.

We suggest, then, that measures be immediately taken by the citizens of this place, for the formation of the "Historical Society of Iowa." Let there be but an organization of this kind, and we doubt not but enough gentlemen will be found ready to communicate information heretofore unwritten. It will not be necessary for persons to attend the meetings of the association — their communications can be transmitted in writing, and laid before the society by the president, and filed among its archives. Let a general invitation be given to gentlemen in possession of information worthy of communication, to unlock their stores of knowledge, and our word for it, Iowa Territory will very soon be more generally known not only abroad, but to ourselves.

Although no immediate action was taken, favorable editorial response resulted in the formation of

the Iowa Historical and Geological Society at Burlington in 1843. During the years that followed some valuable collections were made by enthusiastic Burlingtonians. Unhappily, on January 16, 1853, the entire collection of the Iowa Historical and Geological Society was destroyed by a fire that gutted the three-story brick building housing it. Among the items lost were five hundred "rare and valuable" books, several hundred mineralogical specimens, and other miscellaneous rare items including the bones of Black Hawk.

Burlingtonians were stunned by the loss but promptly instituted a new Society. On the eve of the meeting of the Sixth General Assembly in 1857, news trickled out that Iowa Citizens contemplated the formation of a State Historical Society of Iowa in their city. Burlingtonians sent a memorial to the General Assembly urging the selection of Burlington but it went unheeded. The final decision was made when the Federal Relations Committee, which was chairmaned by Senator Samuel Jordan Kirkwood of Iowa City, took command of the bill in the Sixth General Assembly.

Who were some of the other men who led in the formation of the State Historical Society of Iowa? The initial impetus was given by a group that included Reverend C. Billings Smith, George D. Woodin, Thomas Hughes, M. B. Cochrane, George W. McCleary, F. H. Lee, M. L. Morris, D. F. Wells, J. P. Wood, William Reynolds,

G. H. Jerome, and C. W. Hobart. These men met in the State Treasurer's office early in January for "the purpose of considering the propriety of organizing a State Historical Society." A path had already been cleared for them when Senator Julius J. Matthews of Clinton County, but formerly of Iowa City, introduced a bill "to provide for an annual appropriation for the benefit of a State Historical Library." After being read a first and second time this measure was laid on the table, whence it was removed on motion of Senator Matthews who proposed that it be referred to the Federal Relations Committee.

The bill was reported out on the floor by the Federal Relations Committee on January 23, 1857, with but one significant change. This change, doubtless at the instigation of Senator Kirkwood, saved the institution for Iowa City. The Federal Relations Committee proposed striking out the words "and executed at the capital" and substituting "in connection with, and under the auspices of the State university." Obviously the Committee had a definite idea in mind — it wanted the State Historical Society to be permanently located at Iowa City and not move with the state government to the new capital. The bill as thus amended was approved by the Senate the same day it was offered and immediately passed.

The plan to keep the State Historical Society at Iowa City was made permanent by a provision in

the State Constitution of 1857 which located the state capital "permanently" in Des Moines and the State University "permanently" in Iowa City. On Saturday, January 24, the Senate Bill was reported to the House of Representatives. The following Tuesday the measure was approved by the House and sent to Governor James W. Grimes for his approval or rejection. On January 28 Governor Grimes, who served as first president of the Society, approved the act which created the State Historical Society of Iowa and which made an annual appropriation of \$250 for it to carry on its work. The names of Samuel J. Kirkwood, Julius J. Matthews, and James W. Grimes stand at the forefront of the men who created the State Historical Society.

On January 30, 1857, a group of Iowans met in the Stone Capitol in Iowa City to form a State Historical Society. George W. McCleary was elected president of the meeting and George D. Woodin was named secretary. Most of those attending were Iowa Citizens, with Reverend C. Billings Smith, the pastor of the Iowa City Baptist Church, probably being the most influential man present. After appointing a committee to draw up a constitution for the Society the meeting adjourned "to meet again at the Capitol on the 7th day of February next."

On February 7, 1857, the group reassembled in the Stone Capitol and approved the constitution

presented by its committee. Consisting of five chapters, the Constitution of the Society provided for: name, membership, object, officers, and amendments.

The name of the organization was to be the "State Historical Society of Iowa."

Members were to be elected or authorized by officers of the Society. Dues were one dollar per year and entitled members to free admission to the Society's rooms and lectures and "the privilege of consulting its books, maps, charts and papers."

The objectives of the organization were many:

The object of this Society shall be to collect, embody, arrange and preserve in authentic form, a library of books, pamphlets, maps, charts, manuscripts, papers, paintings, statuary and other materials illustrative of the history of Iowa; to rescue from oblivion the memory of its early pioneers; to obtain and preserve narratives of their exploits, perils and hardy adventures; to secure facts and statements relative to the history, genius, progress or decay of our Indian tribes, to exhibit faithfully the antiquities, and the past and present resources of the State; and to promote the study of history by lectures, and diffuse and publish information relating to the description and history of Iowa.

The officers of the Society were to be a President, six Vice Presidents, a Corresponding Secretary, a Recording Secretary, a Treasurer, a Librarian, and eighteen Curators to be chosen annually. The duties of the Curators, "a majority of whom shall reside in the vicinity of the State University, and five of whom shall constitute a quorum, shall

be the executive department of this association, having full power to manage its affairs in harmony with this constitution."

The officers elected, with their counties, follow:

PRESIDENT

Governor James W. Grimes, Des Moines

VICE PRESIDENTS

H. W. Gray, Linn	Eliphalet Price, Dubuque
George G. Wright, Van Buren	Filander H. Lee, Johnson
C. F. Crookham, Grundy	Samuel J. Kirkwood, Johnson
Corresponding Secretary . . . . .	C. Billings Smith, Johnson
Recording Secretary . . . . .	Thomas Hughes, Johnson
Librarian . . . . .	John Pattee, Johnson
Treasurer . . . . .	J. P. Wood, Johnson

The first Curators and their counties were:

Hon. John Shane, Benton	M. B. Cochrane, Johnson
Hon. D. P. Palmer, Davis	H. D. Downey, Johnson
Hon. D. W. Price, Pottawattamie	J. C. Culbertson, Johnson
Hon. Charles Negus, Jefferson	W. P. Clark, Johnson
W. F. Coolbaugh, Des Moines	G. D. Woodin, Johnson
L. H. Langworthy, Dubuque	G. W. McCleary, Johnson
T. S. Parvin, Muscatine	E. K. Rugg, Johnson
S. G. Winchester, Hardin	William Vogt, Johnson
F. W. Ballard, Johnson	LeGrand Byington, Johnson

The creation of state historical societies through private or public funds, or a combination of both, was not without precedents in American history. On the eve of the establishment of the State Historical Society of Iowa, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin recorded in its Second Annual



Report the state historical and private agencies existing in 1856:

<i>Historical Society</i>	<i>Date Founded</i>	<i>Volumes in Library</i>
Massachusetts	1791	8,000
New York	1804	25,000
Virginia	1818	1,200
Rhode Island	1822	—
New Hampshire	1823	1,560
Connecticut	1825	8,000
Pennsylvania	1825	2,000
Ohio	1831	1,000
New Jersey	1834	1,930
Kentucky	1838	1,000
Georgia	1839	—
Maryland	1844	2,128
Missouri	1844	300
Wisconsin	1849	2,115
Minnesota	1849	400
American Antiquarian	1812	22,000
New England Historical and Genealogical Register	1844	400

In his First Annual Report to Governor James W. Grimes on December 1, 1857, C. Billings Smith, Corresponding Secretary for the Board of Curators, aptly concluded with the following paragraph from the annual report of the New York Historical Society:

The advantages resulting from the study of history, and the collection of historical records, cannot be too strongly urged on the attention of the members of this Society. In

order that history may be written the most authentic materials must be provided. No generation comprises within its own knowledge and experience all that is necessary to secure the integrity of its annals. It must rely upon records, it must examine and compare opinions, it must study the events of the past. It must have the means of investigation and analysis at hand. Collections like these by which we are surrounded, and which are designed to preserve the memories of other days, will be deemed of inestimable value by generations which are to come after us.

Truly, the guideposts were out and able, far-seeing men were mindful of the need for establishing effective state historical agencies throughout the Nation. Fortunately, like-minded pioneers were alert to this need in the young State of Iowa. These men laid a firm foundation upon which generation after generation has built the rich storehouse of books, newspapers, manuscripts, maps, and pictures, destined to give the varied publications of the State Historical Society of Iowa a position of preeminence among its sister institutions of these United States.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN