

# THE PALIMPSEST

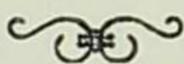
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## James Harlan

In the Hall of Columns in the Nation's Capitol there stands the heroic figure of one of Iowa's greatest statesmen — James Harlan of Mount Pleasant. Chosen with Samuel Jordan Kirkwood to be one of two Iowans to represent the Hawkeye State in Statuary Hall, James Harlan richly merited this signal honor bestowed upon him by admiring fellow Iowans. Not only had Harlan served Iowa in the United States Senate for sixteen years but he had been Abraham Lincoln's choice for Secretary of the Interior. For constructive ability, for capacity of leadership, for sincere statesmanship, James Harlan had few equals among his contemporaries.

Harlan sprang from a sturdy pioneer stock. He was descended from George Harland, a Quaker, who emigrated from the vicinity of Durham, England, to County Down, Ireland, and thence in 1687 to America, settling finally in Chester, Pennsylvania. James Harlan's father, Silas Harlan, was born in Pennsylvania in 1792 and had mi-

grated with his parents to Warren County, Ohio. To Warren County also came the Connelley family from Maryland, with their daughter Mary, who was born in 1797. Silas Harlan and Mary Connelley were united in marriage in 1818 and soon afterwards joined the westward flow of settlers to Lamotte prairie in Clark County, Illinois. It was here that James Harlan was born on August 26, 1820.

Like Abraham Lincoln, who was eleven years his senior, James Harlan was born in a humble log cabin. When not yet four years old his family moved back across the Wabash into Indiana. Young Harlan continued to live in a log cabin which he had seen his father build "with no tools other than a common chopping ax, an augur, frow and hand-saw, and without a single nail or screw, or metallic material of any description."

The idyllic life led by the seven families who had named their Indiana home "The New Discovery" made a lasting impression on young Harlan.

Each of these settlers was the owner of a team of horses, a few cattle, hogs, sheep and poultry. Their live stock lived with but little care from the owners on the spontaneous products of the country. The women converted the fleeces from the sheep into clothing. . . . The country was alive with game, such as deer, elk, bear, turkeys and grouse. So that these settlers had from the first year onward an abundance of excellent food and comfortable raiment, the fruits of their own industry, frugality

and skill. . . . They had no churches nor schools; few books and no newspapers, nor officers of the law. Magistrates were not needed; for there were no malefactors to punish.

It was amid such surroundings that James Harlan grew up, developing the industry, courage, independence, self-reliance and vision that seems to have been the common heritage of so many Iowa pioneers. Thus, from the age of five he had been taught the first lessons of husbandry — dropping corn and pulling weeds. As a result, Silas Harlan found his young son becoming yearly more and more useful “in all manner of farm labor.”

If his father was responsible for teaching young James the rudiments of agriculture, his mother with “persistent patience” taught him how to read and write. Progress was slow since the library in the Harlan home at this time consisted of three books — the Bible, Hervey’s *Evening Meditations*, and an Almanac, the latter having the greatest attraction because of the woodcuts that embellished it.

When James was still a mere lad the family had its first experience with that colorful frontier figure — the circuit rider. A Methodist preacher, William Smith, rode up to the Harlan home one day and asked permission to hold services in their cabin four weeks later. According to James Harlan, his father “was not at this time a member of

any church; he had been brought up a Quaker; but marrying out of the Society, and refusing to express his regrets for his breach of discipline" he had been dropped from the membership roll of the Society. The Methodist minister was granted permission to hold services in the Harlan home and it became a "preaching place, and a home for Methodist Preachers" until James was eighteen years old, when a small church was built.

When James was seven years old a rude log schoolhouse was erected about one mile from the Harlan cabin. Here, and in similar schools, young James studied for three months at a time until his thirteenth or fourteenth year, when he was given to understand that his education was complete. But fate determined otherwise.

One day young James was sent to Rockville, the county seat, to purchase some supplies. In a drug store he "beheld with amazement" a vast number of books on shelves extending nearly one-half way around the store room. Upon inquiring he learned that part of them were school books while the remainder "constituted the public library of Park county." The boy examined the wonderful volumes for an hour, rented Hume's *History of England*, and purchased Olney's *Geography and Atlas*, an elementary work on chemistry, a work on mechanics, a small book entitled *Natural Magic*, and Walker's *Dictionary*. Hurrying home he utilized every spare moment reading these

treasures by the flickering light of the open fireplace in their log cabin home. "I seemed to myself a new being," Harlan declared, "and to have entered on another existence." Thereafter, whenever opportunity offered, he added other books to his library.

Yet another influence on the life of James Harlan came when he was seventeen. A young Kentucky school teacher, Jeremiah Terry, became a boarder in the Harlan home. Terry instructed James in various scientific subjects as well as in forensics and composition. Soon he was reading his first essay before "The Lyceum" which Jeremiah Terry had founded. It was not long before James taught his first three-month school during the winter, receiving \$25 per month compensation. He found expenses correspondingly light — board and lodging costing only seventy-five cents per week.

Three memorable experiences remained before Harlan reached his majority. He recalled vividly a journey to his birthplace in Illinois, his first experience of traveling on his own. Next he remembered the tremendous Whig political party meeting on the battlefield of Tippecanoe during the "hard cider" campaign of 1840. His allegiance to the Whig party dated from this event, which saw all the great Whigs of the nation on hand and orating for William Henry Harrison. Finally, his attendance at Park County Seminary in Rock-

ville, seven miles from his home, left an indelible impression on his mind. When Silas Harlan asked his son what his plans for the future were in May of 1841, James was not long in making up his mind. To the astonishment of his father he declared he had decided "to go to college."

It was about May 31, 1841, that James Harlan set out for Asbury University (now DePauw University) located at Greencastle, Indiana, eighteen miles eastward from his home.

I walked across the country, along a newly made public high-way, at that time but little traveled, cut through a dense forest, for the most part uninhabited, carrying a fair sized bundle, made up of wearing apparel and several school books which I supposed I might need, adjusted to my shoulders on the end of a walking stock.

His method of travel was through choice and not through necessity, he later recalled, because it was "more convenient, more economical, and less bother every way to walk" the eighteen miles.

Harlan enjoyed his college days at old Asbury. It was not long before he established himself as an orator and debater. He joined the Platonean Literary Society and in his freshman year represented the Platoneans against their arch-rivals — the Philological Society — in the annual college debate. He spoke on the negative of the subject "Is a Republican Government better calculated for durability than a monarchy?"

Harlan's college days ended abruptly when his

slender resources were exhausted and he had to go to work to secure funds with which to continue his education. In 1842-1843 Harlan won more college triumphs in forensics; upon his return home he made his first trip across the Mississippi into the much talked of Territory of Iowa with George C. Snow, his prospective brother-in-law, and two other men.

The four set out from Indiana in a "two horse wagon" on September 18, 1843, and crossed the Mississippi at Burlington where they secured lodgings in the "Union Hotel." They found Burlington a town of "considerable notoriety" containing "not more than two thousand inhabitants, residing in primitive looking dwellings clustered together between two rugged hills at the mouth of a small stream called 'Hawk-Eye Creek.' The inhabitants, however, appeared to be alert, intelligent, enterprising, and courteous, — especially so to 'newcomers'."

Harlan and Snow made an overnight stop at Yellow Springs and spent several days at Wapello with friends. Returning to Burlington, they boarded the steamboat *St. Louis Oak* for Keokuk, where they secured lodging in the home of a "full fledged" Mormon.

The town of Keokuk at this date was not attractive. The bluffs were precipitous, and approached so close to the river as to leave room only for a very narrow wagon road, located close up to the water's edge, and one some-

what long row of buildings on the other side of this driveway, where they seemed to be engaged in a sort of life and death struggle with the rugged hills to secure room to stand on. This only business street was undulating, crooked, and unimproved in any way. The houses were small and primitive and only one story in height. One of them only was made of bricks; a very few were frame, and the residue were constructed of logs. The resident part of the town was located on the bluffs, and was even less inviting in appearance than its business street.

From Keokuk, Harlan and his companion proceeded by steamboat to Hannibal, thence by stage-coach to Paris, where he and his companion headquartered for three weeks in a slave area whose inhabitants were strongly anti-Abolitionist. Harlan noted two crowning evils in the slavery system — the inevitable tendency to depravity in the relations between the races, and the “admitted necessity of keeping the slave population in ignorance.”

Late in October, Harlan and Snow found themselves in the small village of Clinton in Monroe County, Missouri, where a Methodist Quarterly Meeting had convened. Harlan was elected school teacher for a three-month session beginning November 7, 1843. In addition to conducting literary and debating societies, Harlan gave instruction to an evening “Grammar School,” his companion, George C. Snow, being one of his pupils.

Upon his return home from his Iowa-Missouri experiences, Harlan assisted his father in putting

in the spring crops. In the meantime he busied himself with political speeches and was offered the Whig nomination for a seat in the Indiana legislature, but after reflection "acquired sufficient courage to decline." Soon he was back in Asbury University without serious loss of position in his classes despite his long absence.

As an upper-classman Harlan studied Latin and Greek and yet found time to participate in forensic contests. He warmly supported the "Great Compromiser" during the campaign of 1844. On August 20, 1845, James Harlan was one of a class of eleven who received their diplomas and the degree of B.A. at Asbury University. He had been in actual attendance only three years but had not remained "intellectually idle" during his periods of absence. The total cash expenditures for his entire college career aggregated only \$266.72.

Education at "Old Asbury" did not prevent Harlan from entering the social life of the town of Greencastle. In his diary he recorded the names of approximately twenty young ladies, that of Ann Eliza Peck appearing most frequently. On November 9, 1845, James Harlan and Ann Eliza Peck were united in marriage, President Simpson officiating at the ceremony. Their first child, Mary Eunice, was born on September 25, 1846.

A three-month term as teacher was followed by more farm work. Then, in the spring of 1846,

Harlan was offered the principalship of Iowa City College. He arrived in the capital of the Territory of Iowa with his young wife on March 25, 1846, after a twelve-day journey across Illinois in an open buggy. Harlan organized Iowa City College into three departments, an infant department, a preparatory department, and a collegiate department. Tuition ranged from \$2 to \$6 per subject, or group of subjects, per quarter, and board could be secured in the homes of "respectable and pious" Iowa City families at from \$1.00 to \$1.75 per week.

Scarcely had Harlan arrived in Iowa City when he became embroiled in what was destined to become a stormy political career. In the first state election in 1847 the Whigs chose Harlan as their candidate for Superintendent of Public Instruction, a position paying a higher salary than that of governor. He defeated Charles Mason, who had served as Chief Justice of the Territorial Supreme Court, but the election was called illegal by the Democrats. In the contest to fill the vacancy he was again defeated by Thomas Hart Benton, Jr., a Dubuque Democrat, by methods which Harlan felt were highly irregular and partisan.

Following this unfortunate experience, Harlan went to Indiana and then to Cincinnati where he purchased a stock of books and stationery for a drug store with which he hoped to earn a living while he studied law in Iowa City. During the

summer of 1848 he purchased a modest unfinished home on the corner of Dubuque and Jefferson for \$546. Practically the same property was sold for \$7,500 in 1902 and the Medical Laboratory Building erected on the site.

On May 15, 1850, the Whigs nominated Harlan for governor without his knowledge and consent and he declined the nomination. The following September he was admitted to the bar and began the practice of law in Iowa City. Meanwhile, he continued his public speaking on various subjects. He opposed the construction of a railroad from the Mississippi to Iowa City without the aid of eastern capital, and in December, 1851, participated in the celebration of the completion of the plank road between Burlington and Mount Pleasant. In February, 1852, he was admitted to practice law before the Iowa Supreme Court.

The versatility of Harlan is attested by his appointment as surveyor of a number of townships in Carroll County in 1852 and 1853. He had learned the rudiments of surveying from Jeremiah Terry, the Kentucky schoolmaster who had boarded with the Harlans in Indiana. According to Harlan: "The incidents of this episode in my life history were most agreeable, and its experiences were useful; but not pecuniarily remunerative."

Shortly after his return from surveying, Harlan received a letter from the Mount Pleasant Colle-

giate Institute (now Iowa Wesleyan College), urging him to accept the presidency or principalship of that institution. Harlan drove to Mount Pleasant to confer with the Board of Trustees.

They informed him that they owned twenty acres of ground and a commodious two-story brick building, that they were free from debt and had a school of fifty or sixty pupils, and that with proper management the number would rapidly increase. They proposed to give Harlan entire charge of the institution, with the understanding that he should employ all of his assistants, collect tuition and other funds, pay all expenses, and retain the remainder as his own compensation. The plan thus outlined was unsatisfactory to Harlan, and he frankly told the board that unless they would agree to do much more than they proposed he could not accept the presidency. He had supposed that they intended to establish a real college, capable of giving a full collegiate course. But as this would require several buildings, adequate scientific apparatus, a good working library and a competent faculty, there must be some other source of income than merely the tuition of the students.

The astounded Trustees finally accepted Harlan's views, engaged him as president and began a fund raising campaign.

As I now remember we received no one subscription which exceeded one hundred dollars; and very few of them were so large. Many of them did not exceed five dollars each, and a considerable number were smaller than that.

The net results were that Harlan moved his family to Mount Pleasant, built a home which now

is part of the Harlan Hotel, and on July 4, 1854, delivered the address at the laying of the cornerstone of a new three-story brick building, known today as Old Main.

After two years as president of Iowa Wesleyan, Harlan was elected United States Senator from Iowa by a rump legislature after one house had formally adjourned. This irregularity led to the vacating of his seat in January, 1857, but with the newly-formed Republican party now in the ascendancy Harlan was promptly returned by his supporters in the legislature. In 1860 he was the unanimous Republican choice for a second term.

As a United States Senator, Harlan concentrated on such Western measures as homesteads, college land grants, and especially the Pacific railroad, which had begun to tantalize Iowans since five of the ten railroads linking the Mississippi with the Atlantic had reached the Father of Waters opposite Iowa. When the Civil War broke out Harlan strongly supported Lincoln and was so close to the president that he was appointed Secretary of the Interior by Lincoln in 1864. Four years later, on September 24, 1868, at the Harlan home in Washington, Robert Todd Lincoln and Mary Harlan were united in marriage.

Harlan broke with President Johnson on reconstruction and submitted his resignation from the Cabinet in July, 1866. He promptly announced himself a candidate for United States Senator, do-

ing so at the cost of the friendship of Samuel J. Kirkwood and James W. Grimes. In such matters as reconstruction he was aligned with the radical Republicans and, unlike Grimes, supported the impeachment of President Johnson. Harlan also supported President Grant's Santo Domingo policy, which was strongly under fire by Democrats as well as Liberal Republicans. As a result of his position with the conservative Republicans his enemies combined in 1872 and succeeded in electing William Boyd Allison to take Harlan's place in the Senate.

Harlan entered another stormy era in his career when he became Secretary of the Interior. Departmental policies created bitter enmities and led to charges of improper appointments, and of corruption in the disposal of Indian and railroad lands. Harlan had determined to economize by dismissing every individual who was not delivering full service to the Department. As many as eighty removals were reported on a single day. The most notable of his many dismissals in pursuance of his economy program was that of Walt Whitman, who had earned the gratitude of the government by his devoted service to sick and wounded soldiers in Washington hospitals during the Civil War. Because of his literary fame Whitman had been given great latitude in his clerkship in the Indian Bureau. While a number of writers reviled Harlan for the dismissal, Whitman's more candid

friends admitted his services were not essential. With respect to his honesty and integrity, Harlan met all charges squarely and with convincing candor.

His defeat in 1872 brought Harlan's official political career to a close when he was but fifty-two years old. Although a candidate for senator and governor at various times he never again was successful in an election. His only remaining official service was as a member of the second court of Alabama claims.

Harlan spent the remainder of his career in Mount Pleasant. He was president of Iowa Wesleyan for a short time in 1869-70, and was president of the Board of Trustees at the time of his death. He was a staunch Methodist and an active supporter of the temperance movement. His only living son, William, died in San Francisco in 1876, and his beloved wife, Ann Eliza Harlan, died at Old Point Comfort, Virginia, on September 4, 1884. Both son and wife were buried in the family plot in Forest Home cemetery in Mount Pleasant.

Ann Eliza Harlan was a strong personality in her own right. She was the first woman of our country "moving in what we call high circles of society" to personally visit and minister to the wants of suffering soldiers during the Civil War. She belongs to the band of brave women who have been referred to "as the Florence Nightingales of the Civil War."

James Harlan died in Mount Pleasant on October 5, 1899, in his eightieth year. Mr. and Mrs. Robert Todd Lincoln were at his bedside at the time of his death. Governor Shaw issued a formal proclamation referring to James Harlan as "one of the really great men of the nation" whose high service to the country had "reflected luster on the state of his adoption." After referring to his service during the "critical period" of the Civil War, Governor Shaw directed that the flags of all public buildings be placed at half-mast until after the funeral, and suggested that "the school-houses throughout the state display a similar token of mourning in honor of the first official head of the educational forces of Iowa."

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