

THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XXII ISSUED IN FEBRUARY 1941 No. 2

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Trenton

Trenton is a village in Henry County, Iowa, nine miles northwest of Mount Pleasant. When the visitor first sees the plan of the village and its public square filled with beautiful trees, he visualizes a city that might have been. Trenton at one time did aspire to be the county seat, and later there was promise of its becoming a thriving manufacturing center. But no railroads reached it, and its chief industry moved to Fairfield, Iowa. Now, its unoccupied shops, neglected buildings, and old houses suggest to the observer that the village has seen better days.

In the spring of 1836, Michael Crane made a claim to the land where Trenton now stands. On it he laid out a village and called it Lancaster, after the city of that name in Pennsylvania. In 1837 the claim was sold to Samuel Brazleton, Colonel Asbury B. Porter, and George Miller. These men resurveyed the claim, replanned the village, and named it Trenton, after the capital of

New Jersey. Several years later, George Miller purchased the interest of the others and became sole proprietor of the potential town. The village grew steadily. The census of 1854 reported 226 inhabitants. By 1880, however, the population had shrunk to 181. At that time there were three dry goods stores, one grocery, one hotel, three physicians, three carpenters, and four blacksmith shops in the village.

In its heyday, Trenton was known for its chief product, Charter Oak wagons. By 1887, the Charter Oak plant had an annual capacity of over 500 wagons, famous in that section of the country for their quality. The plant, however, had outgrown Trenton and in 1888 it was moved to Fairfield.

Joel Turney was the man who had brought prosperity to Trenton. In 1848 he had left Columbus, Ohio, for the West Coast. On his way, he came to Trenton, located on one of the overland routes to the West. There he opened a temporary blacksmith shop where he could repair wagons for the rough trail across the prairies and plains. The next year the forty-niners, rushing to the California gold fields, found at Trenton, Iowa, a mechanic anxious to serve them, and Joel Turney was kept too busy to follow the moving frontier. After overland travel dwindled, a wood-

working shop was added to the plant and he made farm wagons in a small way, entirely by hand. Then came the Civil War and wagons again were in greater demand. After the war, wagons were shipped to the new country opening in the West. Through those years the plant gradually expanded until it reached a peak production of over 500 wagons a year.

Several blocks southeast of the public square is located the Henry County Institute of Science, an institution that has brought to Trenton even more attention than its wagon factory. The Institute building is a large, square, red brick structure, two stories high, facing south. Constructed in 1869 at a cost of \$6000, the Institute building has been in use constantly since that time, and, although it bears a few marks of age, can be used for many more years. The large room on the main floor has served as an auditorium and for social gatherings. Beyond this room, at the back of the building, is a hall with a broad staircase leading to the library room on the second floor. Around the walls of the library are the book cases, holding over 1800 volumes, and the museum cases, containing among other things interesting mineral and geological specimens. Hanging on the walls are portraits and landscapes, purchased by the Institute of Science. Several pieces of

statuary rest on the top of the book cases. Other furnishings include organs, tables, chairs, and a stove.

The Institute building was erected by George Miller, one of the early proprietors of Trenton, especially for the Henry County Institute of Science. For seventy years this structure has borne witness to the magnanimous spirit of its donor. George Miller will long be remembered as the most illustrious citizen of Trenton, Iowa.

MELVIN GINGERICH