

# THE PALIMPSEST

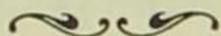
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## *Du Buque Visitor*

A lone horseman was making his way slowly over the trackless prairies of northern Illinois. He was a strong, vigorous, alert young man of about thirty, and his course was ever westward toward the setting sun. Swimming streams and floundering through sloughs, John King was determined to seek his fortune in the newly-opened Black Hawk Purchase.

Born in Shepherdstown, Virginia, in 1803, King had moved to Chillicothe, Ohio, in 1829. Four years later the irresistible urge to "go west" obsessed him and he set out on horseback. In Illinois he found the squatters prostrated with fever and ague. Every cabin at which he stopped for the night had its shaking, moaning victims. Undaunted by this introduction to a new country, King urged his hosts to that better land of hog and hominy where the "shakes" were unknown. As he approached the Galena mineral region he sometimes traveled all day without seeing a person.

On September 11, 1833, John King reached the Mississippi opposite Dubuque and gazed with mingled hope and admiration at the tall timber-crowned bluffs before him. When he landed from the rough flat boat that served as a ferry, he had barely three dollars in his pocket. What he lacked in wealth he made up for in determination and soon he was mining for lead with his partner Alexander George on the "Bee Branch". He steadily rose in the esteem of his companions and it was not long before he was appointed chief justice of Dubuque County.

By the fall of 1835 Dubuque could boast of having a church, stores and taverns, saloons, and scores of log cabins. The rough mining community lacked one thing, however, to break the dull monotony of its drab existence. It had no newspaper. King felt the need of a newspaper, for all too often he had walked to Galena in order to secure a copy. He decided to satisfy that want.

Before the close of navigation in 1835 King set out to pick up a press and find a printer. On March 31, 1836, he drew up a contract with William Cary Jones of Chillicothe, Ohio, whereby he bound himself "to pay the said Wm. C. Jones the sum of three hundred and fifty dollars, fifty dollars of which to be in hand paid, and the balance in sums as they become due on demand; and fur-

ther, to provide the said Wm. C. Jones with suitable boarding and lodging during one year, from and after the 20th day of April proximo — in consideration that the said Wm. C. Jones do go to the town of Dubuque in Michigan territory, with the said John King, and there for the term of one year as aforesaid, do faithfully perform the duties of foreman in the printing office of the said John King, and likewise such other duties in superintending the publication of the newspaper as may be required.”

King next journeyed to Cincinnati where he bought a Smith hand press. Invented in 1822, this press was superior to any which had been used before. It had a cast iron frame but in place of the characteristic screw with levers of other early presses, Smith substituted a “toggle joint” that was at once simple and effective. King also purchased some plain type and enough material to issue a small weekly newspaper.

Back in Dubuque he and Jones set up their printing shop in a two-story log cabin twenty by twenty-five feet in dimensions, erected by Pascal Mallet in 1834 for a residence. While Jones busied himself at his work, King crossed over to Galena where he found a fellow Virginian, Andrew Keesecker, literally composing editorials with the printer’s stick. King prevailed upon

Keesecker to join in the venture and to Keesecker belongs the credit for setting the type and running the press for the first Iowa newspaper.

The first issue of the *Du Buque Visitor* appeared on May 11, 1836, at "Du Buque, (Lead Mines,) Wisconsin Territory". Its folio line read, "Truth Our Guide. The Public Good Our Aim". The paper was printed on an "Imperial sheet" which, folded once the narrow way, formed pages twenty by twenty-six inches in size. Each of the four pages carried six columns. Small as the paper was compared by modern standards, the "Visitor" was larger than the editors had anticipated. This fact, coupled with the high cost of wages and provisions, compelled them to set the subscription rate at three dollars a year in advance or four dollars if paid at the end of the year.

In the prospectus the editors promised to "cherish and advocate republican principles" and "encourage and foster such measures as will perpetuate our happy form of Government, and promote the best interests of the community". The paper was pledged to pursue an "impartial, independent, and honorable course" and to open its columns to "all Political Essays, if penned in the spirit of free inquiry." Foreign and domestic news would be printed and contributions were invited upon "moral, literary, and scientific sub-

jects". The cause of virtue would be preserved and the paper rendered "useful to the Farmer, Mechanic, Miner, and Merchant." Land sales in the western country would be given particular attention. It was the "sanguine belief" of the editors that such a paper would be "no indifferent acquisition to our honorable, respected, and enterprising fellow-citizens."

Eastern readers must have been impressed by the information that Dubuque was the "Capital of Du Buque County" and the prospective "Seat of Justice of the Territory of Wisconsin". The town was "handsomely situated" on the west bank of the Mississippi in the Black Hawk Purchase. Its "magic growth" was almost without a parallel. "Within three years", the prospectus declared, "this region was in possession of the wild, untutored savage. We now see the village containing near one thousand inhabitants; sixty Stores and Groceries; four Taverns; two Churches; a number of Mechanic Shops, Trading Establishments, &c." The soil was described as inferior to none, the climate temperate and salubrious. The pure atmosphere inspired "vigor and health, even in those who emigrate to the country debilitated by disease." Inexhaustible mineral resources destined Dubuque to "become a mighty city, and sit as Queen of the West."

Except for a gradually increasing proportion of advertising, the initial issue set the standard for subsequent numbers. A selection from Catherine Sedgwick's new novel, *The Linwoods*, a story of the Revolutionary War, filled more than three columns. From the *Utica Evangelical Advocate* the editors gleaned a two-column article by Reverend J. M. Austin on education. Small excerpts on "The Worth and Devotion of Woman's Love", "Religion", and "Ingratitude", filled the remainder of page one. From the first the editors did not hesitate to pirate material from other newspapers and periodicals. On August 3rd the "Visitor" admitted that its columns were "frequently enriched" by extracts in prose and verse from such magazines as the *Knickerbocker*, the *Zodiac*, the *New Yorker*, and the *Rural Repository*.

Page two contained a speech by George Wallace Jones on the Wisconsin Territorial bill and another by Zadoc Casey presenting a bill to create the office of Surveyor of public lands in Michigan Territory west of the Mississippi. Subscribers must have read with some pride that Senator John J. Crittenden, of the committee on public lands, had reported a bill for laying out Fort Madison, Burlington, Belleview, Dubuque, and Peru. A local bard who all too aptly signed himself "Poor Yorick" was responsible for an original song "To

Spring" written on a bleak day in the last of April. A column lecture on the formation of character, a report on the Indian wars in Florida, the burning of a negro at Saint Louis, and brief items regarding steamboat arrivals, the weather, mail routes, new lead discoveries, and the need of cattle, illustrate the varied interests of the editor. Unfortunately the local items were fragmentary in character.

Territorial, national, and foreign news could be found on the second page. The names of Sam Houston, Davy Crockett, and Santa Anna were familiar to subscribers to the "Visitor" as they read of the struggle for Texas independence. The preëmption law and the problem of public lands lay closer home than any others.

Almost five columns of the third page of the first "Visitor" were given to advertising. The bulk of this was local in character, though subsequent issues contained advertisements of Peru, Mineral Point, Galena, and Saint Louis merchants and professional men. E. Lockwood, Emerson & Crider, Wheeler and Loomis, George S. Nightingale, Quigley & Butterworth, Davis Gillilan, and O'Ferral & Cox were prominent advertisers. Philip C. Morhiser claimed to render general satisfaction as a house, sign, and ornamental painter.

C. H. Gratiot offered for sale dry goods, boots and shoes, silk and fur hats, Tuscan and straw

bonnets, guns, axes, shovels, spades, hay forks, rakes, bed cords, plough lines, manila rope, lump sugar, tin ware, and liquor. "The Cheapest Must Prevail", declared A. Levi, whose groceries and provisions, despite his nationality, included mess and prime pork. Baptiste Lapage sold all kinds of "Confectionery — Nuts, Oranges, Lemons, Raisins, Apples, Pies, Fruit, Crackers, and Wines" in his Main Street store. John M. David did expert tailoring. The medical profession was represented in the first issue by Dr. R. Murray, Horatio Newhall, and F. Andross.

The fourth page of the "Visitor" contained a poem on "The Dying Girl" and "The Excellency of Woman". Two variety articles, one on "Prairie Scenery", and the other on "Mountain Scenery", were followed by a rather long story about "The First Steamboat". Two-thirds of a column was devoted to laws against gambling and a like amount of space to a treatise on evil speaking. Briefer accounts were inserted on such subjects as newspapers, wives, and marriage.

Subsequent issues of the "Visitor" devoted ever increasing space to advertising. A charge of one dollar was made for a single insertion of a "square" or less. Each subsequent insertion cost fifty cents, while yearly advertisers were granted liberal discounts.

On June 15th the "Visitor" reached the sixth week of its existence and William C. Jones was taken into the firm as junior editor. No change in the policy of making the paper "strictly Wisconsin in its character" was contemplated. Its purposes were to "make known the great mineral resources of our infant territory, as far and as fast as they are developed; its soil, climate, and productions; its past and passing history, and future prospects; the doings of the general government in relation to it, and the acts of its own immediate public functionaries".

King and Jones proclaimed that a full, impartial, and authentic record of the first Territorial legislature would be reported. They pledged wholehearted support to Governor Henry Dodge but did not propose to meddle in national politics. "The hardy adventurers to this new country", they concluded, "have enough to do to take care of their own interests, without fighting the battles of the States. When we are permitted to participate in the Federal Government, and have a voice in electing those who administer her affairs, it will be time enough to engage in the disagreeable business of party strife."

King hoped to increase the size of the paper but this was never done. On August 3rd the editors announced that they had ordered a supply of

smaller type to allow the inclusion of a larger quantity of reading material and invited original articles from literary friends. "The present number", concluded an editorial bow, "completes the first quarter of the *Du Buque Visitor* — the first and only journal printed West of the Mississippi river and north of the state of Missouri. The editors embrace this occasion to tender their unfeigned thanks to the public for the liberal support extended to them; and to offer their assurances that their efforts to deserve patronage will not be abated."

A distinctive feature of the *Du Buque Visitor* was the number of men connected with its history during the brief span of its existence. William C. Jones relinquished his interest on August 31st and King promptly offered liberal wages to any journeyman printer of good moral habits who made immediate application. Jones found his political opinions adverse to a large majority of the inhabitants of Dubuque and could no longer "conceal or disguise his decided and strong antipathy" for the Jacksonian administration. Since King was decidedly friendly to the Democrats, his partner thought it only fair to resign and avoid any action which might be prejudicial to the newspaper.

John King continued the publication although his political course elicited many complaints from

the thousand subscribers. "It would be much easier", he wrote on October 19, 1836, "to turn the Mississippi, and make it flow from whence it came, or to shoulder an Egyptian Pyramid, than to please all, and he who is so silly as to attempt the latter, deserves to be tied in an Indiana swamp in mosquito time, and punctured to death by them." Financial problems were of more concern to King and on November 9, 1836, he informed those who owed him for job-work that a little "cash" was indispensable in order to sustain the "Visitor".

On December 21, 1836, King announced the sale of the "Visitor" to William W. Chapman, a native of Virginia who had arrived at Burlington in 1835 and opened a law office. Soon afterward Chapman was appointed prosecuting attorney by the Governor of Michigan Territory. The ownership of a newspaper was a powerful vehicle for any politically ambitious frontiersman and Chapman was not slow to take the "Visitor" when the opportunity was presented. He promised to avoid "personal altercation" and keep the paper free from everything savoring of "defamation or scurrility". He pledged himself to boost Dubuque and the Iowa District. Instead of maintaining the non-partisan attitude of his predecessor, Chapman flung his support to the "illustrious" Andrew

Jackson. His loyalty to the cause of democracy was soon rewarded by his appointment as attorney for the Territory of Wisconsin.

Not long after Chapman took his new office, the Dubuque "Visitor" fell into the hands of its third and last owner — William H. Turner. It continued under his editorship until May 17, 1837, when the first volume of fifty-two issues was completed. Thereupon the establishment was sold to William W. Coriell, John King, and John B. Russell. Apparently no issue was published the following Wednesday but on Saturday, June 3, 1837, the first issue of the *Iowa News* appeared.

Throughout its existence the "Visitor" was the only paper in the Black Hawk Purchase. The steady influx of settlers and the increase in business is attested by the number of advertisements which almost tripled in the space of one year. Although its subscribers and advertisers could hardly appreciate its contemporary importance, the old files (thirty-four issues in the library of the State Historical Department at Des Moines) constitute the most important single documentary source on Iowa history a hundred years ago.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN