

Early State Governors

Under the first State constitution of Iowa, adopted in 1846, the Governor was elected for a term of four years. Three Governors — Ansel Briggs, Stephen Hempstead, and James W. Grimes — served under this constitution. Governor Briggs was a product of the school of experience, with but little educational training, yet he was an advocate of improved educational methods. Hempstead and Grimes were both students of the law and exerted influence in the development of early legislation.

Briggs first appears in Iowa history as a stage driver and mail carrier during the Territorial days. A pioneer in the field of transportation, he became conversant with a large range of Territorial affairs and helped to lay the foundations of Statehood. That he was a Democrat among the Democrats may be suggested by the fact that his home was at the town of Andrew in Jackson County, at a time when the Democratic party was in the vigor of youth.

Born in the Green Mountain State in 1806, he moved to Ohio where in the early thirties he was engaged in the establishment of stage lines. In

1836 he removed from Ohio to Iowa where he continued to operate stagecoaches. A little later he entered into a contract for carrying the United States mails weekly between Dubuque and Davenport, and also between Dubuque and Iowa City. In 1842 he was elected as a member of the Territorial House of Representatives from Jackson County. Subsequently he was named sheriff of the same county.

When Iowa was admitted to the Union in 1846 there was a constitutional provision which prohibited banks of every description. Immediately the outstanding political issues centered around the banking question — banking institutions being favored by the Whigs and opposed by the Democrats. Three candidates were available for the Democratic nomination for Governor — Judge Jesse Williams, William Thompson, and Ansel Briggs. At a banquet shortly before the nominating convention, Briggs struck a responsive chord by offering the toast "no banks except earth, and they well tilled". This slogan, with its appeal to the pride of the producers and the prejudice of partisan leaders, was at once caught up as a party cry and became a potent factor in winning the nomination for Ansel Briggs.

The administration of Governor Briggs was generally placid, although now and again the Gov-

ernor exhibited an independent firmness that was not easily shaken. One of the perplexing problems of his administration developed in connection with the Missouri boundary question, which had arisen during the Territorial days, but which was not finally settled in the courts until 1848.

After the expiration of a four-year term, Governor Briggs continued to reside in Jackson County where he engaged in commercial business and enjoyed the companionship of old friends. There in gladsome retrospection he lived over again the strenuous days of his Governorship, much as soldiers fight again the battles that have long since passed. Coming to Iowa in an early day he had played an important rôle in the development of the Commonwealth. The remembrance of these early experiences and the continued growth and development of the State were sources of real delight to him. Thus in honorable old age he was comforted with the realization of a hope that he had expressed upon retirement from the Governorship, that his adopted State might "ever be distinguished for virtue, intelligence, and prosperity".

During the closing years of his life ex-Governor Briggs resided with a son in Omaha, Nebraska, where he died in 1881 at the age of seventy-five years. His remains were interred at

Omaha, but in 1909 were removed to Andrew, Iowa, where a suitable monument was erected by action of the Thirty-third General Assembly.

Stephen Hempstead, the second State Governor of Iowa, was a native of Connecticut, born in 1812. His youthful days, it is said, were typical of those of other boys — a cruel schoolmaster, a love affair with a black-eyed girl, and an admiration for anything pertaining to military training. He organized an artillery company of boys, armed with wooden swords, and “felt as proud as a general at the head of an army”.

Hempstead's father was a member of a partnership in the boot and shoe business. When the business had prospered for a while the other member of the partnership contracted debts and then absconded with all available funds, leaving the elder Hempstead to suffer insolvency and to be thrown into prison for the payment of partnership debts. Upon release from prison, he moved to Saint Louis, braving the danger of Indians in that frontier region in preference to the ignominy of imprisonment for debt.

Young Stephen Hempstead did not remain long in Saint Louis, however, but soon left for Galena, Illinois, then known as the “Eldorado of the North”. Then came the Black Hawk War, in which he participated. At the close of the war, he

attended college at Jacksonville, Illinois, later returning to Saint Louis where he studied law. In the spring of 1836 he settled at Dubuque, being the first attorney to enter upon the practice of law at that place.

In 1838 Hempstead was elected as a member of the Territorial Legislative Assembly. At the following session he was selected as president of the Council. In 1845 he was again elected as a member of the Council which then convened at Iowa City, and again he was named as the presiding officer. In 1850 he was nominated by the Democratic State convention as candidate for Governor, and was elected for a term of four years.

True to the principles of the Democratic party at that time, Governor Hempstead like Governor Briggs was opposed to the establishment of banks. In his first inaugural address he said: "By the restriction of State debts, the prohibition of banking and of special acts of incorporation, except for political or municipal purposes, we are secured from many evils which exist in older States, where, in consequence of the establishment and continuance of those institutions, their governments have become complicated, oppressive, and subversive of civil liberty.

"With no banks among us to create distress or panic by their failures, contractions, and expan-

sions, with but few corporations except those formed under general laws, our citizens relying on their own industry and frugality, are advancing steadily to competence and wealth, showing to the world that bank indulgences, paper money, and special privileges, are unnecessary to secure to a people happiness and prosperity."

After serving successfully for a term as Governor, Hempstead filled various local offices, including that of county judge, county auditor, and justice of the peace, in Dubuque County. He is remembered not alone as Governor of the Commonwealth, but also as one of the most sturdy of Iowa's pioneer statesmen.

James W. Grimes, who succeeded Hempstead as Governor of Iowa, was a man of conspicuous integrity and courage. Of Scotch-Irish descent, a native of New Hampshire, born in 1816, he entered Dartmouth College at the age of sixteen, read law in an office, and at the age of twenty he came to Iowa, locating at Burlington. In 1838, when Iowa Territory was organized, young attorney Grimes was chosen as one of the Representatives from Des Moines County to the Legislative Assembly. The Democratic party was then in power in Iowa and there were many southern sympathizers. Grimes, with the New England background, was soon looked upon as the cham-

pion of the rising opposition to the westward as well as the northward extension of slavery.

In 1854, Grimes, representing the Whig party, was elected Governor of the State. His attitude against the extension of slavery made him a national figure, and Salmon P. Chase referred to his election as "the best battle for freedom yet fought."

Under the leadership of James W. Grimes, many changes were accomplished. The government was so completely reorganized during the years of his Governorship that his administration might be designated as the beginning of a new era. A new constitution was adopted in 1857. New school laws were enacted. Provisions were made for State educational institutions, libraries, and the State Historical Society. Progressive business and banking laws were passed. In all these things Governor Grimes was the moving spirit both in influence and in action during the years from 1854 to 1858.

After serving as chief executive of Iowa he devoted his talents for ten years to national affairs in the United States Senate where he displayed more than usual courage. At the time of the impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson, he was an old man and so ill that he could scarcely attend the session. His friends everywhere were urging him to vote

against the President. When the name, Grimes of Iowa, was called in the Senate, however, he arose and with much effort announced his vote, "Not guilty". By this declaration, Grimes lost many friends and much political power, but he was true to his ideals. His action that day spoke louder than words, and placed him with Henry Clay in declaring: "I'd rather be right than President."

Under the Constitution of 1857 the term of the Governor was reduced from four to two years. The first Governor to serve under this constitution, also the first elected on the Republican ticket and the last to serve during the pre-Civil War period, was Ralph P. Lowe.

Lowe was a native of Ohio, born in 1805. He graduated from Miami University in the class of 1829. Thereupon his father offered him a farm located within what are now the city limits of Chicago, but young Lowe preferred adventure. He borrowed two hundred dollars, purchased a pony, and started on horseback through the South. In Alabama he taught school and read law. In 1834 he returned to Ohio and four years later moved to Iowa, bringing his wife and an infant son. They came overland with two wagons and two saddle horses, and it is said they "greatly enjoyed their journey". Having located at Bloomington (now Muscatine), Lowe entered the practice of law.

and was soon elected to the office of district judge. He also served as a member of the Constitutional Convention of 1844.

In 1858, Ralph P. Lowe was elected Governor. As a member of the Republican party, he favored the establishment of banks and corporations. Yet he declared that no "maxims of political economy, however well observed — no system of currency, however nicely adjusted or guarded", can compensate for a departure from the law of labor. In accordance with this view, in his inaugural address in 1858, he said: "Let agriculture, the vanguard of all other occupations, have its full and appropriate share of the industrial forces of the country, with a commerce just equal to a fair distribution of its products, always following, and never in anticipation of its annual crops, and the world's affairs and business will in the main flow on with comparatively a smooth and full stream."

Throughout his administration Governor Lowe advocated industry, integrity, and thrift in government as well as in private affairs. Upon retirement after two years of service as Governor, he was elected to the Supreme Court of Iowa. Later he moved to Washington, D. C., where he practiced law for more than a decade, becoming one of the prominent attorneys of the capital city.

Thus, prior to the Civil War, seven Governors

ruled Iowa — three during the Territorial period and four after Statehood was attained. Of these no two were born in the same State, and none was a native of Iowa. They came from Virginia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Ohio. One was a farmer, one a printer, one a stage driver, and four were lawyers. One was a Republican, two were Whigs, and four were Democrats. After their service as Governor, one became a district judge, one a Supreme Court judge, and one went to the United States Senate. There was unanimity among them only in the fact that all were men of stalwart character and all attained the high office of Governor.

J. A. SWISHER