

The Man Who Would Be Governor

“Our Secretary, Wm. B. Conway, Esq. arrived at this place last evening”, announced the *Burlington Gazette* on July 21, 1838. “He brings no news with regard to the Governor — in the absence of whom, the executive duties will devolve upon him.” William B. Conway was enthusiastic over the importance of his office — as Secretary of the Territory of Iowa he was just one step from being Governor.

Inexperienced in governmental responsibilities, Conway had gained his position because of a political obligation. When he stepped from the steamboat *Ariel* at Burlington he was forty years of age, energetic, confident, and familiar with the newspaper business. Through the years of the ascendancy of Andrew Jackson and his follower, Martin Van Buren, Conway was an ardent supporter of the Democratic party. He expressed his political opinions for two or three years in the editorial columns of the Pittsburgh *American Manufacturer*. Later he went to Ebensburg, Pennsylvania, where he published the *Cambria Mountaineer*. His “rabid, violent, partisan” editorials, which T. S. Parvin said were “quite in accord with

many of the personal traits of the editor", were appearing in this paper when the Senate, on June 13, 1838, confirmed his nomination as Secretary of the Territory of Iowa.

Conway was a character of contradictions. He was loyal to his allies and bitter toward his enemies. Irish and Catholic, he formed a close friendship with Antoine Le Claire; vituperative and aggressive, he provoked the animosity and contempt of the vigorous and assertive Robert Lucas. Small and wiry in stature, he was big in action. In speech and in writing he employed a verbose sarcasm. The Democratic *Iowa News*, referring to his editorial ability, stated before he came to Iowa that it was a capacity in which Conway had "gained the esteem of all his fellow-laborers, and proved himself a gentleman of fine talents, possessed of knowledge well fitting him for the transaction of public business." The Secretary appears to have had a strange combination of dynamic will, talent, and dogmatic conviction.

In the organic act was the provision that "in case of the death, removal, resignation, or necessary absence of the Governor from the Territory, the Secretary shall have, and he is hereby authorized and required to execute and perform all the powers and duties of the Governor during such vacancy or necessary absence, or until another

Governor shall be duly appointed to fill such vacancy." Did this mean that the Secretary was Acting Governor during the interval before Governor Lucas came to Iowa? Conway thought that it did.

Nearly three weeks elapsed between the day when Iowa became a separate Territory and the arrival of the Secretary. Meanwhile, no evil consequences had ensued and no immediate emergency was anticipated. Apparently, however, the Secretary of State, John Forsyth, had urged Conway to be in the Territory by July 3rd in order to launch the new Territorial government. These circumstances, together with the implications of the organic act, led Conway to believe that he ought to assume immediately some of the official duties properly belonging to the Governor. Ambitious, if not prudent, the Secretary set the wheels of government in motion.

Almost at once, the first official acts of "Acting Governor" Conway raised the question whether he was performing his duties circumspectly. One of the functions to which the Secretary turned his attention was the partitioning of the Territory into judicial districts. Following a meeting of the members of the Burlington bar, which probably urged the aspiring Secretary to act at once, the "acting governor of Iowa, for the time being", on

July 25th established the judicial districts, assigned the judges, and posted the dates when court would convene in each seat of justice. This action seems to be a curious paradox: on the same day he issued the proclamation, Conway wrote to Governor Lucas of his "daily expected" arrival; and, furthermore, the first court was not to convene until the second Monday in September. The *Burlington Gazette* informed its readers on July 28th that "This act (conceded by all to be of pressing necessity) is, we understand, the only executive duty the Secretary designs to discharge for the present." The Acting Governor may have been influenced by the enthusiasm to get things started; he may have been subject to political pressure. Perhaps Conway acted too hastily.

Simultaneously with his first official pronouncement, Conway fanned the flames of local prejudices and sectional pride. He toyed with the idea of fixing the place of meeting for the first legislature. Burlington, the former capital of Wisconsin Territory, was assumed to be the desirable location, but Secretary Conway's visit to Davenport started a rumor that the time-being Governor would convene the legislature in the Scott County town. The *Iowa Territorial Gazette* on August 11th reported to its readers that the "Secretary, we are sure, is desirous, if he acts at all in the mat-

ter, to carry out the wishes of the people generally. When we last saw him, he expressed every disposition to this end; and we have not the slightest doubt, that when he gives the whole matter the attention and investigation which it demands, he will act promptly and correctly." Conway later asserted that he never had any intention of fixing the meeting place of the legislature. He did, however, select Davenport for his own home.

Until the arrival of Lucas on August 15th, Secretary Conway continued to act in a gubernatorial capacity. He had commenced negotiations for a commissioner to aid in the establishment of the southern boundary of Iowa. And on the day Robert Lucas arrived Conway was ready to define the representative districts and call an election. The coming of the Governor, however, made further activity unnecessary and Conway left immediately for Davenport.

Robert Lucas, a man of firm convictions and experience in politics, took exception to the activity of the Secretary during the days preceding his arrival. The proclamations of Conway opened a breach that never healed. T. S. Parvin, the private secretary of Lucas, later wrote that the Governor "became very indignant, declaring that 'all the acts of the Secretary, as Acting Governor were null and void, inasmuch as *no vacancy had been*

created,' either by his death or absence, as he had not yet entered upon the discharge of his official duties." However, the acts of the Secretary were not rescinded and Lucas began where Conway left off.

Through the first Territorial year the antagonism between Lucas and Conway continued. In this clash of personalities, Lucas spoke contemptuously of the Secretary while Conway in his letters often wrote Parvin (a close friend of Lucas) with a small p. At a public dinner given in honor of Governor Lucas — a festivity attended by the Territorial dignitaries — Conway was either not present or did not offer a volunteer toast. Indifference was one of the Secretary's methods of showing his disdain.

In a letter of November 17th Conway wrote that "To advise with the Executive, in all matters relating to the public interests, is esteemed by me as a pleasing duty, and whilst I would preserve all proper distinctions between our respective functions and responsibilities, it will always afford me great satisfaction to be able to concur in what he may deem it his province to suggest and recommend." Insistence upon the independence and importance of his own "Department", however, involved Conway in quarrels with both the Governor and the first Territorial Assembly.

To furnish supplies for the new government was one of the Secretary's duties. Impatience on the part of the legislature, a stinging letter, and the Governor's intervention embroiled the chief officials in the "penknife quarrel". When Conway joined forces with the legislature against the Governor, Parvin wrote in his diary that the Secretary had "come out and shown that he is not the true blue". Justice Thomas S. Wilson finally mediated the controversy but only after the Secretary had succeeded in arousing the ire of the Governor and his friends.

Both Lucas and Conway were to blame. The Governor was easily irked, while Conway found it difficult to subordinate his ambitions to the authority of his superior. On occasion Conway was indolent. For example, he apparently never kept an Executive Journal but left the task to the Governor. At the same time, Lucas often considered the actions of his expansive associate "as an offensive usurpation of authority". The Governor, on the other hand, was occasionally regarded by his compatriots as contentious and bigoted.

That Conway was a man of talent was seldom questioned. At the first term of court, twenty attorneys (one for approximately each thousand inhabitants in Iowa) were admitted to the bar and prominent among the names was that of William

B. Conway. They were admitted by Chief Justice Mason who himself had taken the oath of office (on July 23rd) before the Territorial Secretary. Besides being read in the law, Conway was acquainted with the literature of other fields. Parvin on Christmas Day, 1838, wrote in his diary that he had "Read Philosophy of living. Nibuhr. Burke & Beecher on Intemperance", which he had borrowed from the library of the Secretary. Parvin later referred to Conway as "the scholar and the poet" and also as the "Iowa Minstrel". The Secretary evidently possessed literary skill and a succulent wit that won recognition throughout the Territory. A poem by Conway entitled "The Couch of Sickness" appeared in the *Iowa Territorial Gazette* on November 24, 1838.

The design of the Territorial Seal is a historical exhibit of the Secretary's ability. On November 22, 1838, the Council passed a resolution that "the Secretary of the Territory of Iowa, be and is hereby requested to transmit to this Council, the Great Seal of this Territory, with its impression, for inspection". Thereupon, the Secretary transmitted a wax imprint of the seal to the Council. With his usual verbosity, Conway also wrote a description of his design. "The slightest examination of the seal will disclose to the Honorable Council the Eagle, the proud and appropriate emblem of our

national power, bearing in its beak, an *Indian arrow*, and clutching, in its talons, an *unstrung bow*, and while the idea thus delicately evolved, is so well calculated, to make the eyes glisten with patriotic pride, and cause the heart to beat high with the pulsations of conscious superiority, it nevertheless presents a touching appeal to our manly sensibilities, in contemplating the dreary destiny of a declining race; nor should it fail to admonish us of the immense importance of improving, in every possible point of view, that vast inheritance which it is their peculiar misfortune to undervalue and neglect."

Speaking of the design, T. S. Parvin years later related that when the seal arrived from the hands of William Wagner, of York, Pennsylvania, the engraver, "Secretary Conway brought it to the Governor's office to show it, and how pleased we all were at the appropriateness of the design and the *poetical* description the Secretary had written of it". The emblem served through Territorial days until it was replaced by the Great Seal of the State of Iowa. The designs upon the other Territorial seals (Supreme Court, District Courts, Commissioner's Court, and Probate Courts) were all devised by the Secretary and "were all as appropriate in their several spheres as that of the 'Great' Seal of the Territory". Conway wrote to

the engraver on September 2, 1839: "You will endeavor to have *all* the seals ready about the middle of next March, at which time, I will, if alive and in my present station make you a visit for the purpose of examining and I trust, approving the seals."

During the fall of 1838, several men gathered at the rooms of Governor Lucas in the Burlington House. Among the company present besides Lucas were: William B. Conway, Ver Planck Van Antwerp, Jesse Williams, Joseph Williams, J. G. Edwards, and T. S. Parvin. The conversation turned to the application of the name "Badger" to Wisconsin, and immediately the question of proposing a nickname for Iowa was raised. After various sobriquets were mentioned some one proposed "Hawkeye" and all agreed upon its appropriateness. The suggestion was perpetuated when "Old Hawke" Edwards changed the name of his newspaper to the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*. Thus, Secretary Conway was associated with the origination of two of Iowa's most cherished symbols — the nickname Hawkeye and the Territorial seal which has been handed down through history by the State University and the State Historical Society.

Through the spring and summer months of 1839 the Secretary spent most of his time in Davenport.

The Territorial government was running smoothly. When the legislature was not in session there was little to do. Main issues had been settled and the enthusiasm for a new task had worn off. The only controversial diversion was an epistolary combat conducted in the *Iowa Territorial Gazette* during February, 1839. Conway defended the position he had taken against the Governor while the first legislature was in session. During the opening days of the second session of the Territorial Assembly in the fall of 1839, the brief career of Secretary Conway was abruptly closed by death.

On November 6, 1839, Parvin recorded in his diary: "Wm. B. Conway Secy. of the Terry. died of congestive fever". The *Iowa Territorial Gazette* on November 9, 1839, reported that the "Territory has thus been deprived of one of its most important officers, literature has lost an ardent votary, and his wife and child their only protector." Commenting upon his character, Editor Clarke wrote, "He gathered no riches about him; he became not conspicuous by the force of affluence; but his success in life was derived from another source — a source we all respect and admire — the power of intellect. He died, leaving behind him the enviable reputation of a man of letters."

Both houses of the legislature resolved to wear the appropriate badges of mourning. On November 9th a public meeting was held in Davenport which drew up a series of articles with respect to the deceased Secretary and condolences were sent to Mrs. Conway. Accompanied by a committee of the legislature, the body of the Secretary was taken from Burlington to Davenport where it was buried from the newly erected St. Anthony's Church. Father Pelamourgues performed the services. The fourth registry of the death roll reads: "On the 9th of November, 1839, was buried William B. Conway, Secretary of the Iowa Territory who died in Burlington of the billious fever; aged 41."

Conway was like a passing storm in the early years of the Territorial government. He came to Iowa unknown. He caused a momentary political tempest. And when he had passed, the ascendancy of Robert Lucas was unclouded.

To fill the vacancy caused by Conway's death the legislature directed Charles Weston, the Territorial fiscal agent, to assume the duties of the Secretary until President Van Buren could make a new appointment. A ready and willing successor, however, was available. James Clarke, editor of the *Iowa Territorial Gazette*, on July 22, 1839, had written to his father of Conway's conduct. "Every

Democrat of influence in the Territory is out against him and they will ask of the President his removal. The agents of the general government who are known to and have influence with the President, viz., the Governor, three Supreme Judges, four Land Officers and Marshal, have determined, I understand, to petition for his removal, and at the same time ask that I may be appointed in his stead." And late that same year, on November 23, 1839, James Clarke was appointed by President Van Buren to the position of Secretary. Six more years and Clarke achieved the dream of Conway (a Secretary who would be Governor) when he succeeded John Chambers and became the third Chief Executive of the Territory of Iowa.

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