

The Census of 1838

The immigration that flowed into the territory west of the Mississippi in 1838 was a subject of enthusiastic comment in the newspapers of that time. One editor observed that the number of immigrants was "almost incredible". An estimated count was occasionally attempted. The Fort Madison *Patriot* reported on March 26th, that at the first of the week 150 families were counted on their way to the Black Hawk Purchase, "between this place and Rushville", Illinois. The ferry service at Fort Madison was inadequate.

With the population increasing so rapidly, the apportionment of representatives in the Territorial legislature was a perpetual problem. For this reason the Wisconsin Legislative Assembly in December, 1837, ordered the "second census or enumeration of the inhabitants of the Territory of Wisconsin" to be taken in May, 1838. This count, completed just at the time Congress was creating the Territory of Iowa, afforded as accurate a measure of the rapidly changing population as was possible.

The sheriff, with the assistance of deputies if required, was the designated census taker in each

county. He was instructed to prepare his report in the form of a "schedule" consisting of columns captioned in order "Names of master, mistress, steward, overseer, or other principal person", "Names of townships or divisions", "Heads of families", "White males", "White females", "Free males of color", "Free females of color", "Total amount", and "Remarks". The count of negroes was apparently designed to exclude persons in bondage, perhaps because slavery was not legal in the Iowa country. Indians "not taxed and who do not live as civilized white men", as well as officers and soldiers of the regular army who were not actual residents of the Territory, were omitted from the enumeration.

The sheriffs began their census duties on the first Monday in May, except in Crawford and Clayton counties where the work was started earlier. Within thirty days, according to the law, they were to complete the count and, after posting copies of the returns in two conspicuous places in each county, to send the original report to the Secretary of the Territory.

The report of the census here summarized concerns only the twenty-one counties of the Territory of Wisconsin which presently comprised the Territory of Iowa. Not all the schedules in their complete form have been preserved, but from such

reports as exist in the office of the Wisconsin Secretary of State at Madison the following table has been compiled.

<i>Counties</i>	<i>White males</i>	<i>White females</i>	<i>Males of color</i>	<i>Females of color</i>	<i>Total</i>
Benton	0	0	0	0	0
Buchanan		no report			
Cedar	320	237	0	0	557
Clayton	447	241	4	5	697
Clinton	281	157	4	3	445
Delaware		no report			
Des Moines					4605
Dubuque	1381	928	35	37	2381
Fayette		no report			
Henry	1679	1379	2	0	3060
Jackson			3	2	881
Johnson	157	80	0	0	237
Jones					241
Keokuk	0	0	0	0	0
Lee	1591	1235	0	0	2826
Linn					205
Louisa	686	491	0	3	1180
Muscatine	700	515	2	1	1218
Scott	751	499	2	0	1252
Slaughter	156	125	1	1	283
Van Buren	1812	1355	4	3	3174
Total poulation					23,242

The above totals do not agree entirely with those submitted by the sheriffs and published in

the *Journal* of the Wisconsin Territorial Council. The discrepancies occur in the schedules of several counties which have been preserved in complete form and are therefore verifiable. The total for Lee County was found to be 2826 rather than 2839 as printed; for Muscatine County, the count totaled 1218, which is twenty-nine less than the number submitted by the census taker; and Henry County's total was increased by two to include the colored population, making 3060.

The figures for Clayton County as here given include the census for that part of the county north of Root River (taking in the Fort Snelling community) which was outside the Black Hawk Purchase and not open to settlement, and include also sixty-two men and eight women at the fort, who were possibly not permanent residents, for the census taker noted that these seventy might be added "if required". The published census report in 1838 does not include the 423 inhabitants above the Root River, but gave only the 274 living south of the Neutral Ground in Clayton County proper.

The census for Jackson, Jones, and Linn counties was placed in one schedule. Unlike the reports of other counties, the heads of families, 224 in all, were added, whether intentionally or by error, to the number of white male (609) and

white female (489) inhabitants, and 5 colored persons, to make the total for the three counties 1327.

The total population of Iowa Territory at the time of establishment appears to have been 23,242 instead of 22,859 as published. In the counties comprising the Territory of Iowa in 1838 the population is 653,832 according to the census of 1930.

Most of the inhabitants of the new Territory of Iowa were in the southern counties. Des Moines County, containing the capital city of Burlington, was largest. Van Buren County, through which flowed diagonally the Des Moines River giving easy access to the rich land, was second in size. A resident of that county reported in June that immigrants were settling there on the average of fifty to a hundred and fifty per day. Henry and Lee counties were next in order, while Dubuque was fifth. The town of Dubuque had 832 inhabitants, and Fort Madison had 429. The census of Burlington is not available, but it was the largest town in Iowa. In two counties, Keokuk and Benton, the sheriffs declared that no inhabitants could be found. If an enumeration was made in Buchanan, Delaware, and Fayette counties, there is no record of it.

In the fifteen counties for which the information

is preserved, there were 112 free negroes, of which fifty-seven were male and fifty-five female. Seventy-two of them lived in Dubuque County.

The average number of members per household seems to have been between five and six. Judging by the twelve counties having records on the point, the proportion of male and female inhabitants was approximately four to three. The ratio of men to women, however, was probably higher because the census included boys and girls who must have been about equal in number. Women were much in demand. They married young, and female immigrants seldom remained single very long.

The term "Remarks" on the report form was variously interpreted by the census takers. In the majority of instances no remarks were made. The sheriffs in several counties inserted the item "boarders included" after some names. Another enumerator put in the occupation, but was not consistent about it, for in the same column the names of towns appear. The Johnson County reporter made a point to insert under the heading "Remarks" the number of male inhabitants over twenty-one years of age. It showed that of the 237 inhabitants, eighty-four were men. In nearly all schedules, the census taker counted both man and wife as heads of family.

Upon the completion of his work, the sheriff declared before the justice of the peace that he had obtained a correct enumeration to the best of his ability, and had posted two copies in conspicuous places. In various instances the reports were displayed at the post office, the courthouse, the sawmill, and at the ferry house.

The normal rate of compensation for the census taking was set at \$3 per hundred persons counted, except in towns of more than 800 inhabitants, where the pay was only \$1.50 for every 300 persons, and in sparsely settled areas where the rate might be as high as \$3 for every fifty persons. Due to the "dispersed situation of the inhabitants", the sheriff of Dubuque County collected the maximum fee for some of his work. Apparently the census takers who toured Keokuk and Benton counties but found no one to count received nothing for their search.

According to the census of 1838 most persons in Iowa were attached to some family. Few isolated individuals were listed. Immigrants came in groups. The family unit was particularly noticeable in the overland migration. "So far as I could learn," one observer wrote, "no person in all that multitude traveled alone, or unattached to a family; and of the very few unmarried men among them each was usually, if not in every case,

a member or a near relative of the family to which he was attached."

Because the main purpose of the census in 1838 was to reapportion representation in the Legislative Assembly, it revealed little information about the settlers except their number and the names of "principal persons". Their nationality, occupation, and economic condition were not divulged. Indeed, the lists present more questions than they answer. The enumeration was, nevertheless, valuable. Prospective settlers, reading the summary in the newspapers, decided which counties seemed most attractive. Moreover, representation in the first Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Iowa was based upon the census of 1838.

MARIE HAEFNER