

## The Years Parvin Remembered

Jumping from a creek bank to the sand below, a boy accepted the consequences of a childhood dare. "That jump crippled me for life", said Theodore Sutton Parvin, "and I was henceforth destined to plod among the books, for which I soon developed a surprising taste." No longer could he fulfill the hope of his sea-captain father and become a navigator. Instead, the influence of his devoted Christian mother became dominant.

"As a child," Parvin later reminisced, "and as so many boys before me have done, I commenced with *Robinson Crusoe*, that never-failing delight of youth thirsting for adventure. Then I worked my way through *Aesop's Fables* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, until at last I took up the grand old English of the King James Bible, and upon this I was thoroughly grounded in my home."

The eldest of Josiah and Lydia Harris Parvin's thirteen children, Theodore Sutton was born at Cedarville, Cumberland County, New Jersey, on January 15, 1817. When he was twelve years old his family moved to Ohio. Entering a Cincinnati public school upon his arrival, he soon acquitted himself so well that he attracted the attention of

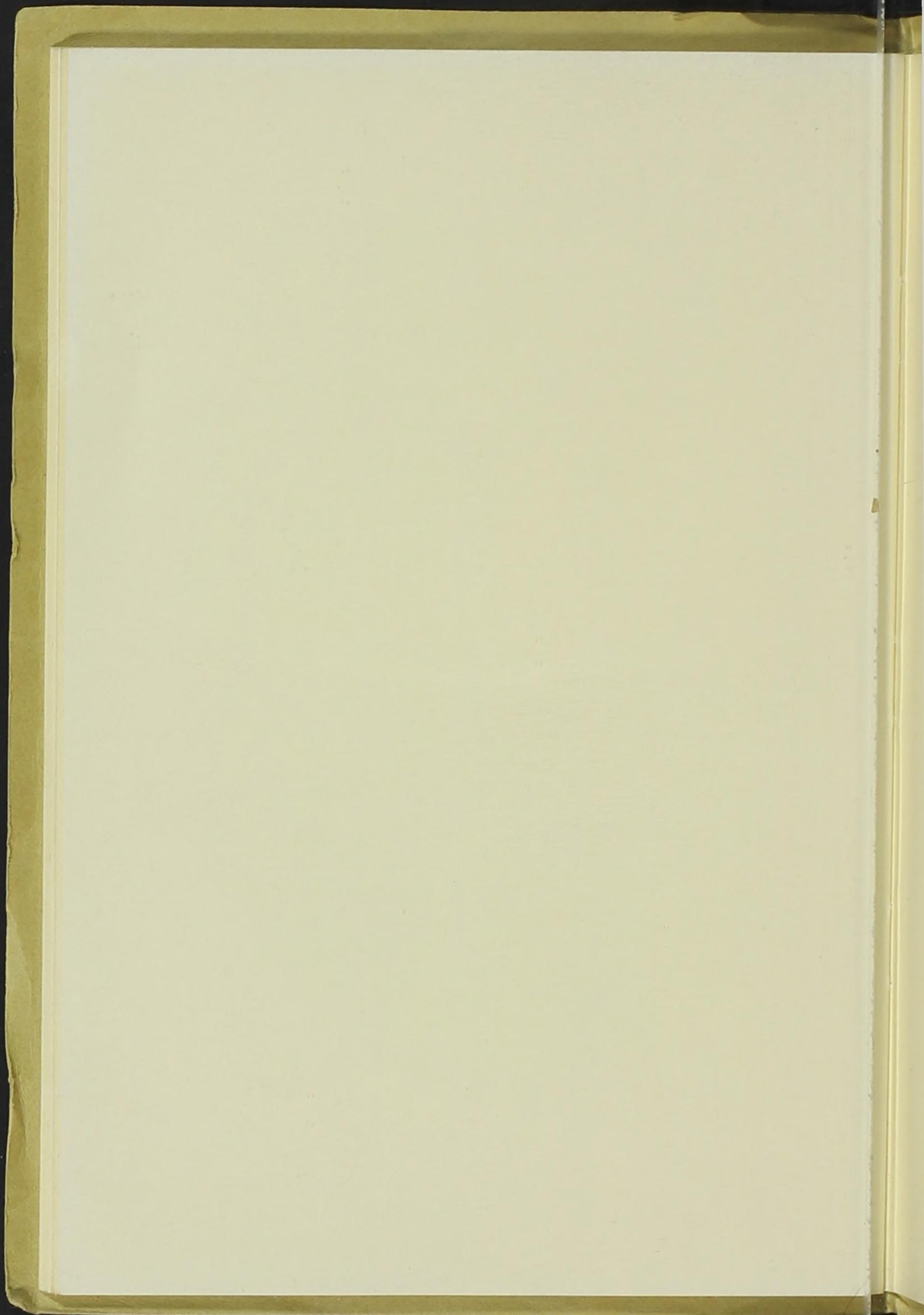
William Woodward. This pioneer among educators awarded young Parvin a scholarship in order that he might pursue his studies further. Between 1832 and 1835, Parvin attended Woodward College where he excelled in mathematics. There he heard the President of Cincinnati College, William H. McGuffey, who was then preparing his First and Second Readers, lecture on "the atheistical controversy".

Upon graduation from Woodward College, Parvin accepted a position in the Cincinnati public schools and later became an assistant in the office of the State Superintendent of Schools. But he was not without other ambition; he began the study of law under Timothy Walker, a noted Ohio judge and legal educator. In 1837, after graduating from the Cincinnati Law School, he was admitted to the bar. On the first of January that year, just before he was twenty years old, Parvin began a journal in which he was to record the daily happenings for over sixty years. During that time his diary illustrates his studious inclinations and it constitutes a social history. For example, his entry of March 4, 1837, noted the inauguration of President Martin Van Buren and on June 1st, he mentioned an address by Daniel Webster, "a more than good speaker".

About this time, the Iowa country interested this



THEODORE S. PARVIN



lawyer-educator. His longing became more acute upon hearing the romantic tales of his father who had just returned from the "new west". Consequently, Parvin sought out the newly appointed Governor of Iowa Territory. Through a mutual friend, J. C. Avery, he was introduced to Robert Lucas. His reasons for wanting to go to Iowa were, he wrote in his journal, "in part, those common to emigrants, but a part will for the present remain a mystery to all but one". Theodore Parvin was in love.

Possibly impressed by the young man's attainments and perhaps desirous of having a protégé, Lucas decided to take Parvin to Iowa. On August 1, 1838, Parvin wrote in his diary: "At 2 p. m. I took aboard the steamboat 'Tempest', Captain Burt, my books — law, political and miscellaneous — to the number of nearly three hundred volumes." And that afternoon Robert Lucas, accompanied by T. S. Parvin and Jesse Williams left Cincinnati for Iowa Territory.

While the boat moved down the Ohio River, the Governor and his companions spent their time reading and in conversation. On one occasion Parvin recorded: "My friend Williams and myself entered into a conversation on the usual amusements and recreations of young people. He advocates them, while I most heartily disapprove

of the whole." Grounded on sandbars and delayed by storms, the *Tempest* arrived in Saint Louis on August 13th. Two days later the Governor's party aboard the *Brazil* landed at Burlington.

While Governor Lucas was busy with the duties of his new office, protégé Parvin became the Governor's "private secretary". Investigating the possible sites for the Territorial capital, Theodore Parvin and Jesse Williams went with the Governor on his tour of inspection. At Dubuque they met the leading citizens and were hospitably entertained. On August 22nd Parvin was admitted to the practice of law by Judge T. S. Wilson. Toward the end of the week the Governor and his aides visited George W. Jones at Sinsinawa. Thence they took a boat downstream from Galena, spent two days at Davenport, proceeded to Bloomington by stage, and thence returned to Burlington by boat on August 30th. They had seen the principal towns in the Territory and talked with most of the prominent men.

Homesick for family and friends, Parvin was commissioned by Governor Lucas to go to Cincinnati and purchase supplies for the new government. After a journey across Illinois by stage, he arrived at his old home on September 27th. There he renewed old friendships and bought \$5000

worth of stationery and office supplies. He also shipped the books Governor Lucas had selected for the Territorial Library.

Upon his return he found the members of the first Territorial legislature gathering at Burlington. Governor Lucas was busy writing his first message to the Legislative Assembly and Parvin, thinking of his public school experience, suggested some executive recommendations on education. The legislative session soon produced a snarl of controversies. Throughout Governor Lucas's quarrels with Secretary Conway and the legislature, Parvin in speech and in action remained loyal to his superior.

The "private secretary" was rewarded. On April 10, 1839, Lucas appointed Parvin the Territorial Librarian. Fourteen days later he was named prosecutor for the Second Judicial District of the Territory. And on October 7th, he accepted the appointment of United States District Attorney. Through these months of court activity, Parvin's journal records men and events: a first glimpse of Iowa City; the growth of the Territory; the Iowa-Missouri border war; the death of Secretary Conway; and the humor of Judge Joseph Williams.

Vitally interested in politics, Parvin supported the Democratic party until it floundered on the

rocks of the slavery issue. In 1840 he was a delegate to the Territorial Convention of his party and in October of the same year he was chosen Assistant Secretary of the Council. A year later, having lived in Bloomington after his appointment as district prosecutor, he was elected judge of probate for Muscatine County, a position which he held until 1850.

In 1844, when the proposed State Constitution of that year was a partisan issue, Parvin, acting independently, campaigned against it. Though he favored statehood, he could not accept some of the provisions in the organic law, particularly the Nicollet boundaries proposed by Congress. Finally, the Constitution of 1844 was defeated by less than a thousand votes. The influence of Parvin contributed much to that decision.

Although his opposition to the first constitution was contrary to the policy of his party, he seems not to have lost popularity among the Democrats. From 1847 for a period of ten years he was Clerk of the United States District Court. He resigned to become Register of the State Land Office, a position he left in 1858 to become the Democratic candidate for State Auditor. Defeated by J. W. Cattell, he quit politics and turned his attention in other directions.

Parvin the man was in some respects more inter-

esting than Parvin the politician. Adding later to a journal entry of December 19, 1837, Parvin wrote: "To-day first saw Miss O. W. Mowry." Henceforth, however, the historian finds pages of a romance carefully erased. To go west and to find a home, may have been one of the reasons Parvin sought the acquaintance of Robert Lucas. At least he had discussed his decision with Miss Mowry because, previous to his departure, he wrote that with her he "walked out, talking of sundry matters and things." His desire to return so soon to Cincinnati may have been heightened by his budding romance. Letters that traveled between Olive Mowry and Theodore Parvin might have had the scent of lavender: a home hoped for; the faith to live in the new country; and a love that made them close though they were far apart. In April, 1841, just when pioneer Parvin has established a secure foothold, he heard of the dangerous illness of his sweetheart. His political success seemed insignificant when he learned in October, 1841, that Miss Mowry had died. The concluding lines of his entry for that day can be seen through the erasure.

O, trifle not with that strange thing,  
The heart —

Romance revived again on November 27, 1842. "At church today", he wrote, "I saw a Miss Mc-

Cully, a very attractive and intelligent looking young lady." After a brief courtship, Agnes McCully and Theodore Parvin were married on May 17, 1843, at the Presbyterian Church in Iowa City. To them six children were born.

On March 14, 1838, before coming to Iowa, Parvin had become a Freemason in Cincinnati. It was not until November 5, 1840, however, that the following Masonic notice appeared in the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*: "The regular members of the Masonic Fraternity of the Territory of Iowa are requested to meet at the room over the store of Ralston & Patterson, near the National Hotel in the city of Burlington, on Wednesday evening next, 11th November, A. D. 1840 A. L. 5840, at 6 o'clock P. M."

According to Parvin's journal about a dozen men attended the meeting from Burlington, Bloomington, Mount Pleasant, and Iowa City. Requesting a charter from the Grand Lodge of Missouri, the Iowa Masons received their dispensation on November 30th. On this date Parvin recorded in his diary: "Lodge in the evening. *First Lodge in the Territory of Iowa*. Elected Junior Deacon." The chief officers elected were: Hiram Bennett, Master; William Thompson, Senior Warden; and Evan Evans, Junior Warden. A few years later, on January 8, 1844, the Grand Lodge of Iowa was

organized and Parvin was named Grand Secretary. He served in this capacity until his death. Later in 1844, the Grand Secretary proposed the founding of a Grand Lodge Library. From a small beginning and under the careful direction of Parvin, the Masonic Library in Cedar Rapids grew to be one of the most important of its kind.

After leaving the field of politics, Theodore S. Parvin became professor of natural sciences at the University of Iowa. From 1860 to 1870 he served on the University faculty. At the same time he was secretary of the newly established State Historical Society. In this capacity he was one of the founders of the *Annals of Iowa*. From 1847 to 1885 during his years in Iowa City, Professor Parvin welcomed lecturers and other distinguished visitors with charming hospitality. While associated with the University, he lived in the historic South Hall.

Following 1870, Professor Parvin attended to his duties as Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Iowa Masons and Grand Recorder of the Grand Encampment Knights Templar of the United States. Building a library and reminiscing of days past, he spent his last years (after 1885) in Cedar Rapids.

Lecturing on the Iowa of his youth and writing of men who brought Iowa to maturity, Theodore

S. Parvin left a score of invaluable documents on the history of the years he remembered. Peculiarly fitted for his many contributions, he laid the corner-stone of Iowa history. Alert and keen of perception, he was usually accurate in his judgments; well educated and historically minded, he contributed articles of importance to the learned magazines of Iowa. Living beyond an ordinary span of life, he reckoned among his contemporaries both pioneers and pensioners, Whigs and Populists, Robert Lucas and Albert B. Cummins. Theodore Sutton Parvin was one of the strongest links between Iowa of the past and Iowa of the present.

At last, on June 28, 1901, his voice was silent and his hand still. Parvin died amidst public respect and regret. During his last illness when he was certain of his immediate fate, the old man remarked, "The men who made Iowa, and those of them who made Masonry in Iowa — all that band of valiant and great-hearted men — they are with me, and I cannot lack for good company."

Theodore Sutton Parvin wrote his own tribute. Inscribed in his diary was this aphorism: "Every reasonable being should be able to give some rational account of the manner in which he has spent his time."

JACK T. JOHNSON