

The Fort Madison Patriot

"Having been solicited to commence the publication of a Newspaper in the town of Fort Madison," James G. Edwards issued a prospectus on November 28, 1837, in order to "ascertain as nearly as possible the amount of patronage that might be relied on." He was confident that the resources of the Iowa country and the "enterprising character of its inhabitants" justified such a venture. Inasmuch as the two papers in the western part of Wisconsin Territory were Democratic, the need of a Whig organ seemed apparent. But Edwards was primarily interested in moral and cultural welfare and promised to espouse such causes as would "tend to elevate the character of our Territory and Nation and raise the standard of virtue and intelligence among the people." If the good citizens would subscribe to his paper its success would be assured.

Though Edwards had sold his printing establishment in Jacksonville, Illinois, he did not dispose of the subscription list of the *Illinois Patriot*. The new Fort Madison *Patriot* was to be substituted in fulfillment of unexpired subscriptions. Thus the continuity of the newspapers published by James

G. Edwards was maintained. The editor promised that the paper would be "printed in handsome style, on an imperial sheet", and publication would begin "as soon as the materials could be obtained." Probably a number of Fort Madison citizens agreed to pay three dollars a year in advance to encourage the establishment of a local newspaper.

Apparently the response to the prospectus was encouraging for Edwards bought the press and type of the Montrose *Western Adventurer and Herald of the Upper Mississippi* from Isaac Galland and was ready for business late in March, 1838, at his "Office on Water Street, over Captain Browne's Store." The first number of *The Fort Madison Patriot* appeared on Saturday, March 24th, with the announcement that thereafter publication day would be Wednesday, beginning on April 4th.

Editor Edwards was pleased with his new venture. He was proud to have more than redeemed his pledge "in regard to the size of the paper", and therefore presented it "without any fears of its favorable reception or its ultimate success." The *Patriot* was, indeed, a large sheet, measuring about twenty-two by nineteen inches. Each issue consisted of four pages carrying seven columns. (The Burlington and Dubuque papers had only six columns.) It was printed in a remarkably clear,

round-faced variety of type in three sizes — probably nonpareil, minion, and brevier. Most of the matter was set solid.

Much "sage advice" was proffered against giving the *Patriot* a clear political complexion, inasmuch as the Territory had no vote in national councils. Edwards could not approve of this attitude. If the policies of the Federal government were corrupt or dangerous, he thought they ought to be exposed. "Whatever opinions are entertained by others," he declared, "we are inclined to think that neutrality, at such a crisis as the present, is not much better than pusillanimity." The editor therefore determined to keep his Whig banner aloft and, "in a temperate, but decided and courteous manner," continue to battle "with the enemies of our glorious Constitution." He took this stand "with the greater alacrity," as there was "no paper in the Territory, on this side of the Mississippi," that would "advocate the same principles."

Editor Edwards stated his political principles in his prospectus of the *Patriot*. The tenets, "founded on the Constitution of the United States, and as they were understood and first promulgated by its framers," he said, would govern his policy. One of his objects was to "simplify these principles and hold them up before the public, that the false and sophisticated doctrines so prevalent in

this age of our Republic, shall appear in all their deformity and degradation. In doing this, we shall often come into collision with men high above us; in the present state of things, this will be inevitable;— but we cannot pander to any man's authority — we will not shout hosannah in the train of arbitrary power — no desire of popularity, no fear for personal safety, no expectation of reward shall swerve us from our duty."

The first number of the *Patriot* was well received. "It is a large and neat looking sheet," wrote the editor of the *Iowa News*, and C. S. Jacobs of the *Burlington Gazette* said, "It is a very pretty sheet, and edited with industry and ability." Edwards was pleased. "The universal approbation which has been bestowed upon our first number is very gratifying", he announced, "and will be a strong incentive to bring into requisition all our energies in endeavoring to make the paper interesting and worthy of an extensive patronage."

To insure success, agents were appointed in neighboring communities and friends were invited to obtain subscriptions. They were cautioned, however, against getting subscribers who were not likely to pay. To obviate the reluctance of persons to pay in advance, because many papers "after lingering out a brief existence, have lost their identity and become extinct", Edwards prom-

ised "to secure all who make such prompt payments, by giving our written obligation to furnish fifty-two numbers — a subscription year — or refund whatever may be due in case of failure." Copies of the first number were sent to "several gentlemen" who were not subscribers. If they did not return the paper "in a strong wrapper", the publisher assumed that they wished to be considered as subscribers.

The *Patriot* was a newsy paper. Edwards filled his columns with accounts of national and foreign affairs; information to advance the interests of that "large and respectable class" — the farmers; items directing attention to the development of internal improvements and manufacturing; and articles designed to encourage virtue and intelligence. He used his influence to "secure an education to every child in the Territory." More than the usual amount of space was devoted to editorial comment and a minimum to matter copied from other papers. Advertising gradually increased from less than two columns in the first number to over a full page in July.

In spite of the editor's frank partisanship, he stated his criticisms of public officials fairly and courteously. He did not indulge in the scandalous personal vituperation that characterized the other Iowa editors in 1838. Because he thought the par-

ticipation of George W. Jones in the Cilley duel was an insult to "the high minded people of this Territory," the *Iowa News* ridiculed his Puritanical ideas derived from missionary boards, "the Sunday school system, temperance pledge, abolitionism," and such things that "should not interfere with our political institutions".

On another occasion Edwards stated that C. S. Jacobs would not have been appointed United States District Attorney for Iowa Territory if the President had known "the habits of the individual appointed." Jacobs, then editing the *Burlington Gazette*, retorted with a deluge of abuse. "For the slanderous and malignant remarks in reference to me, of that miserable apology for a man — that canting hypocrite and lying varlet, Jas. G. Edwards, the *nominal* editor of the Fort Madison Patriot, I feel no other emotion than that of sovereign contempt", he wrote, with a sneer for any one who would "bend the hypocritical knee in solemn mockery at the shrine of religion and morality. If the power of this reptile equalled his purposes and intent of evil, he would, indeed, be dangerous; but Nature, true to herself, while she has given him the *will* has denied him the power to do harm."

To this "long vocabulary of abusive and scurrilous epithets", in which Jacobs revealed his char-

acter, Edwards simply replied that he had "endeavored to obey the laws, lead a *sober* life" and contribute all in his power "to sustain those institutions which are the glory of our land." If Jacobs wanted a duel he was disappointed because Edwards "could not by any means be led into one."

Meanwhile, the Fort Madison *Patriot* was not prospering. Early in May the editor complained that in addition to the incessant labor and anxiety of making the paper creditable, he was "obliged to undergo much mortification in the want of money" to meet current expenses. If the subscribers would pay in advance his pecuniary embarrassment would be relieved. Few took the hint, for "business of importance" soon called Edwards out of town and no paper was published that week. Again in June a week passed without a *Patriot*, when the editor was in Burlington getting a contract for some public printing.

Apparently publication of the *Patriot* was suspended after July 25th while Edwards used all the facilities of his shop for printing the laws of the Territory. He issued a final two-page "extra" number on Saturday, September 1, 1838, and prepared to move to Burlington. There, on December 13, 1838, he published a specimen number (the only one) of *The Burlington Patriot*.



DRAWN FROM A DAGUERRETYPE

COURTESY OF J. TRACY GARRETT

JAMES G. EDWARDS

“Those few subscribers who paid for the late Fort Madison Patriot in advance”, he announced, would “be furnished with the Burlington Patriot to the amount of the numbers due them.” Thus, the line of continuity was preserved, though the pledge was not redeemed until the following June when Edwards started the *Iowa Patriot*, which became the *Burlington Hawk-Eye and Iowa Patriot* on September 5, 1839, the *Burlington Hawk-Eye* on October 17th, and has continued to this day. There “has never been a complete change of ownership and management in all the 108 years” from the beginning of the *Western Observer* to the present *Burlington Hawk-Eye Gazette*, from James G. Edwards to J. Tracy Garrett. Always some members of the old staff have “lapped over into the new and brought with them much of the old tradition.”

JOHN ELY BRIGGS