

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

---

---

VOL. V

ISSUED IN NOVEMBER 1924

NO. 11

---

---

COPYRIGHT 1924 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

## The First Iowa School

Schools have closely followed the pioneer in his westward march across hill and prairie. That splendid declaration in the Ordinance of 1787 — “Religion, morality and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged” — expressed the creed of the founders of Commonwealths in the Mississippi Valley. As the frontier moved forward steadily, irresistibly, the little log schoolhouse was never far behind the settler’s cabin. So it was in Iowa. In 1830, three years before the Iowa country was officially opened for settlement, the first school was established at Galland in Lee County, then known as Ahwipetuck, in the Half-breed Tract.

The Half-breed Tract was a triangular area in the extreme southeastern part of Iowa lying between the Des Moines and Mississippi rivers south

of an extension of the northern boundary of Missouri. In 1824 the United States government reserved this tract for the half-breeds of the Sauk and Fox Indians. Although Indian traders and other adventurous persons had previously entered Iowa at different points, the first permanent settlement by Americans was made on this land. In the late twenties several white families found their way to the Half-breed Tract and were not molested by United States troops stationed on the frontier to keep settlers east of the Mississippi.

Prominent among the newcomers was Dr. Isaac Galland who is described as a writer of ability and a "man of many activities and enterprises." In 1829 he brought his family across the river from Illinois and settled at Ahwipetuck, about six miles up the river from the present site of Keokuk. Soon afterward the families of Isaac R. Campbell, James and Samuel Brierly, W. P. Smith, Abel Galland, and others joined Dr. Galland, so that by the early thirties a typical pioneer settlement had sprung up.

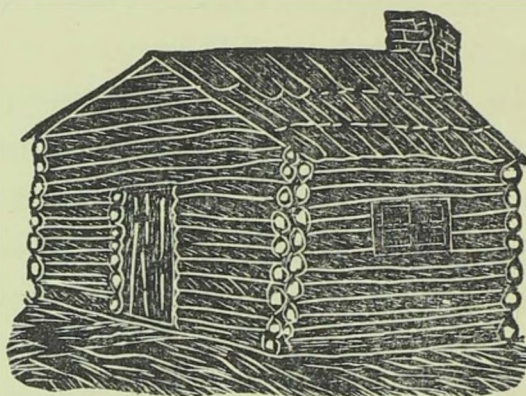
On the instigation of Dr. Galland these families started a school in October of 1830. The organization was simple as there were no legal technicalities to be followed or financial difficulties to be overcome. Dr. Galland simply hired a young man to teach in his "district", which for all intents and purposes extended north of the State of Missouri to Canada and west to the Pacific Ocean.

The teacher of this wilderness school was Berry-

man Jennings, a Kentuckian by birth, who was born in Jessamine County on June 16, 1807. Little else is known of his early life until he was twenty. At that time he established his residence at Commerce, Illinois, which later became Nauvoo. Three years later he was singled out by Dr. Galland to come over to Ahwipetuck and teach in the proposed school. Jennings himself wrote that the "doctor prevailed upon me to teach a three month's school". For compensation he received lodging, fuel, furniture, and board in the Galland home, and the use of the doctor's medical books. The school was opened in the early part of October, 1830.

T. S. Parvin, who engaged in extensive research to discover the facts about the first school in Iowa, surmised that Berryman Jennings "must have been a sprightly lad, and educated beyond his fellows of that old village, else Dr. Galland, who was an educated gentleman in literature as well as his profession, would not have invited him to his home and given him in charge his son". James W. Campbell, one of the pupils in that first school, was more definite: "I remember him well, for when kind and oft-repeated words failed to impress upon the memory of Washington Galland and myself the difference between A and B, he had neither delicacy nor hesitancy about applying the rod, which usually brightened our intellects." It may well be supposed that the young schoolmaster was strict, for the pioneers were of stern mettle.

The cabin in which school was held was situated in a clearing on the bank of the Mississippi at the head of the Des Moines Rapids. To the west a line of timber-clad hills closely hemmed in the little settlement. A small creek that found its way from the woods and ran past the cabin helped to "fence" the school yard. Across the dashing waters of the rapids, up and down the river as far as the eye could see, lay the Illinois country, resplendent in the gorgeous hues of autumn.



WOODCUT OF THE FIRST SCHOOLHOUSE IN IOWA ENGRAVED FROM A DAGUERRETYPE. LOANED BY GEORGE H. DUTY OF MONTROSE

Forty-four years after that notable Indian summer when the first school was opened in Iowa, Mr. Jennings described the schoolhouse in detail. It was "as all other buildings in that new country, a log cabin built of round logs or poles notched close, and mudded for comfort." He explained that it was customary to cut out parts of the logs "for doors

and windows, and also fire-places", while the "jamb-back of the fire-places" was usually "of packed dry dirt" and the chimney was "topped out with sticks and mud." The cabin was "covered with clapboards, weighted down with cross poles. This was to economize time and nails," he said, "which were scarce and far between." Washington Galland, the son of the doctor and one of the pupils, remarked that the cabin had a puncheon floor and the window panes were of greased paper.

The equipment of the school was simple. It consisted merely of benches made of long pieces of puncheon with sticks for legs inserted into slanting auger holes. Books were few, and globes and maps were entirely missing. Only the crudest of makeshift desks, "fastened against the wall under the windows", were provided for the pupils to write on. The "few scholars interested in learning the art of writing" had to stand up at these desks or furnish their own high stools.

In such a school the rudiments of formal education were first taught in Iowa. The aims of an education were few in those days. All that the child should know, except pure book learning, was taught at home. Such subjects as physical training and domestic science were unknown in the pioneer schools. Why paint the lily? Probably reading, writing, and arithmetic constituted the curriculum in the first Iowa school.

Among the few pupils who studied the three R's

at Ahwipetuck were Washington Galland, James W. Campbell, Tolliver Dedman, James Dedman, David Galland, Thomas Brierly, Eliza Galland, and possibly George W. Kinney. They ranged "in ages from six to sixteen." Local historians say that the proverbial "bully" ruled the school and assign that rôle to George W. Kinney who was older than the rest.

The school closed in December. Mr. Jennings, however, continued to live at the Galland home and read medical books until the mid-summer of 1831. At that time he was taken sick and returned to the home of his father in Warren County, Illinois. In 1833 he married and lived at Burlington until 1847, when he joined the westward-bound stream of migration and went to Oregon. It is said that he there became a millionaire but that later, being unfortunate in business, he died poor at the age of eighty-one.

Although the school presided over by Berryman Jennings was the pioneer in its field others soon followed. I. K. Robinson taught at Keokuk during the months of December, 1830, and January and February, 1831. After Iowa was opened for settlement in 1833 many schools were established with the influx of settlers. The log-cabin school at Ahwipetuck was converted into a kitchen at the Brierly home. When this habitation was abandoned it served as a shelter for stock, and eventually it fell into decay and was used for fire-wood.

The spot where the schoolhouse stood was excavated when the Des Moines Rapids Canal was built between 1867 and 1877. And finally when the Keokuk Dam was completed in 1913 the site was inundated by Lake Cooper. According to Ben H. Wilson, the old school grounds are now "under twenty feet of water between three and four hundred feet from the shore line."

On June 27, 1923, a boulder was placed by the Keokuk Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution near this historic spot on the river side of the Scenic Highway at the angle of a long curve just outside the village of Galland. A bronze tablet bearing the inscription — THIS BOULDER MARKS THE SITE OF THE FIRST SCHOOL HOUSE IN IOWA, BUILT IN 1830 — was affixed to the boulder by the same organization on October 18, 1924, and a deed to a plot of ground twenty feet square was given by Timothy J. Harrington and Ella T. Harrington to the State Historical Society of Iowa to be preserved in the archives in memory of the first school in Iowa.

ORVILLE FRANCIS GRAHAME