

Iowa City Lost and Won

The departure of the State officials and their deputies in November, 1857, from the once *permanent* capital did not mean that enthusiasms and hopes had come to an end at Iowa City: subsequent events revealed the fact that the exit simply marked the transition from legislation to education. Indeed, long before the removal of the seat of government to Des Moines, thoughtful citizens had declared that as for Iowa City they preferred that it should become a center of higher learning rather than remain the maelstrom of political activities. As between professors and politicians they seemed to prefer the professors.

To these citizens the compromise by which Iowa City became the permanent seat of the State University appeared to be a satisfactory solution of the uncertain state of affairs that had prevailed for more than a decade. They seemed to think that the foundations of knowledge would in the long run be more certain and more permanent than the shifting sands of State politics.

At the same time the permanent establishment of another institution had been won for Iowa City. During the last days of the Sixth General Assem-

bly and the sessions of the constitutional convention of 1857, it was agreed by the members of both bodies that a State Historical Society should be established upon the invitation of the legislature, and that to secure its permanent location at Iowa City it should be organized "in connection with, and under the auspices of the State University." The revision of the State Constitution, the relocation of the seat of government, and the appearance of a new political party were among the immediate events that deepened the conviction in the minds of men that the history of Iowa was worthy of preservation.

The feeling that history was in the making on the frontier had long been entertained by the pioneers who in the eighteen thirties and forties had crossed half a continent to seek permanent homes in the Iowa country. As they blazed their initials on great oak trees or drove their stakes deep into the prairie land they felt that somehow their own humble lives were part of a great movement that some day would be recorded in the pages of history. The experiences of those who crossed the Mississippi before 1857 must have been inspiring even to the dullest of souls. Before their eyes a wilderness had been cleared and more than a million acres of prairie land had been turned into fields of grain. Hopefully they

mingled their labors with the virgin soil of the richest prairies in all America.

During the second quarter of the century the Iowa builders of empire had organized a Territory and founded a Commonwealth; they had built homes and erected churches; they had developed communities and laid out towns; and with unflagging zeal they had tilled the soil and wooed prosperity. With ax and plow they had fought the battles of the frontier; and in their struggles with nature they had won a lasting victory.

It was in response to this feeling of the significance of State and local history, that the Sixth General Assembly in January, 1857, took the initiative in voting a permanent annual appropriation "for the benefit of a State Historical Society", which on February 7, 1857, was definitely organized by the adoption of a constitution.

Members both of the General Assembly and of the Constitutional Convention had taken an active interest in the establishment of the State Historical Society; and so, on March 3, 1857, by vote of the governing Board of Curators the "members of the Constitutional Convention and the General Assembly were elected members of the Society." After the State officers had taken leave of Iowa City, the Society was assigned rooms in the Old Stone Capitol.

In scanning the balance sheet of Iowa City history, the historian notes that in the year one thousand eight hundred and fifty-seven Iowa City *lost* the Seat of Government, but *won* the State University and the State Historical Society.

By establishing a State Historical Society, the Founders had hoped that this Society would rescue from oblivion the memory of the pioneers who in the eighteen forties and fifties had been the founders of empire. It is in partial fulfillment of that hope that the State Historical Society has published what *The Old Stone Capitol Remembers*.

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