

Some Historical Highlights

In 1820 Samuel C. Muir, a surgeon in the United States Army stationed at Fort Edwards (now Warsaw, Illinois), moved across the Mississippi to the foot of the Lower Rapids and built a log cabin for himself and his Indian wife. Dr. Muir was the first white man to settle on the present site of Keokuk. His cabin was located on Main and Water streets, where the Keokuk Municipal Waterworks plant now stands.

A few years later Dr. Muir moved to the Galena lead mines, leasing his claim and cabin to Otis Reynolds and John Culver, two enterprising steamboat captains of St. Louis. The growth of steamboating to the lead mines required the appointment of an agent at this point, and in 1827 Reynolds and Culver appointed Moses Stillwell to fill this position. Stillwell (died 1834) arrived at the Lower Rapids in the spring of 1828, accompanied by his family and Valencourt Vanorsdoll. These two men might be called the earliest permanent settlers in Iowa, since they both remained at this point until after June 1, 1833.

Stillwell erected two cabins near the foot of present-day Main Street. Three years later, five buildings of hewn logs were erected by the Amer-

ican Fur Company to house its agents, and for many years these were known as "Rat Row." Dr. Isaac Galland, who had built his cabin and school at the upper end of the Des Moines Rapids, came to Keokuk in 1837. Assisted by David W. Kilbourne, who had migrated from New York, Galland laid out the original town plat in 1837, filing it for record in 1840. Newly arriving traders and land speculators complicated the matter of title to some 119,000 acres of land which had been set aside by the government for use of the half-breeds. Eventually these titles were cleared by court decrees.

There are two versions of the adoption of the name Keokuk for the new settlement. According to Dr. Isaac Galland, the christening took place July 4, 1829, when Colonel George Davenport and a group of boatmen decreed that the name should honor the chief of the Sauk and Fox Indians. J. B. Patterson dates the christening as September, 1834, in John Gaines' saloon. Patterson bluntly states that he did not like Chief Keokuk, so voted against the name, but eight others present lifted their glasses of whisky to acclaim the new name.

By 1833 Jesse Creighton, a shoemaker, was teaching eight pupils in a school in his shop. In 1851, when the population had grown to over three thousand, agitation was started for a suitable school building to replace the one-story huts then in use. In the same year the Keokuk Independent

School District was organized. Today, the public school system is administered by a board of seven members, with jurisdiction over two high schools and six elementary schools. The parochial schools comprise a high school and three elementary units.

The first public sale of lots in Keokuk was held in 1837, one lot at the foot of Main Street selling for \$1,500. Business was centered first at the boat stores on the levee which supplied steamboats bound up and down the Mississippi. As boats were improved and carried their own provisions, the levee became the rendezvous for the men who operated the lighters, used in transferring freight from the boats when low stage of water over the Rapids made it impossible for them to make the trip. This meant that business expansion would move up the hill and begin the building up of Main Street, which, at the time the survey of 1837 was made, was described by D. W. Kilbourne "as being so thick with timber and underbrush that it was difficult to make the survey."

Catholics held the first service in Keokuk in 1832, and from this humble beginning have sprung three parishes. The first Protestant minister arrived in 1843; today many denominations of Protestantism are represented in Keokuk. St. John's Episcopal church, soon to celebrate its centenary, installed in 1855 "the first bell whose tones have been heard over a church of that denomination in Iowa."

Granted a special charter by the legislature in 1847, the city held its first election in January of 1848, choosing W. A. Clark as the first mayor. In 1910, citizens of Keokuk voted to install the commission form of government, under which the city is now governed by a mayor and two commissioners.

Brick buildings, many of them constructed from brick manufactured from clay deposits found in the city, began to appear in 1855, as the city enjoyed a boom period. In the panic of 1857, however, business came to a standstill, "and lots which sold for a thousand dollars, found no purchasers at the price of ten," one resident wrote. Recuperation from this depression was just setting in when the Civil War began. Keokuk became an armed camp and the gathering place of some 80,000 troops from Iowa, who embarked on steamboats there for the battlefields of the south. In its present Victory Park, the site of these embarkations, there is a bronze marker "Dedicated to All Those Brave Men and Women, Who Served their Country in Time of War." Five hospitals were established to care for the sick and wounded who were brought here by steamboat. Chief of these was the Estes House, built originally for use as a hotel.

From Keokuk, to lead Union troops, came General Samuel Ryan Curtis, General James C. Parrott, and Lt. Colonel William M. G. Torrence, pioneer school master of the town. Keokuk had its

quota of men in the Union ranks, just as it did in the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, and in both World Wars. In World War I, part of its national guard unit saw service as members of the famous Rainbow Division. In World War II, Lee County Local Board No. 1, Selective Service System, with John L. Ward as chairman and Henry R. Leu as secretary, handled the vast machinery of the draft for south Lee county. An unidentified letter, published in Ohio, claimed that Keokuk figured even in the War of 1812 when a boatload of soldiers being sent from St. Louis to Wisconsin was attacked by Indians in the employ of the British. The battle occurred near the Illinois shore, in sight of the present city.

In order to provide a burial ground for soldiers who died in the hospitals, a plot of ground adjoining Oakland Cemetery was secured, and here the only National Cemetery in Iowa is located. It was enlarged during the 1940's, and military funerals for soldier dead brought back from the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific are held there.

In addition to furnishing military leaders for the nation, Keokuk history is filled with the names of those who served their nation in other capacities. Hiram Barney was collector of the port of New York. William Worth Belknap and George W. McCrary were Secretaries of War and George Williams was Attorney General. James C. Davis was Director General of Railroads, succeeding

William G. McAdoo. Justice Samuel F. Miller, named by President Lincoln to the Supreme Court, has been called one of the ablest interpreters of constitutional law since John Marshall. District Court Judge Henry Bank made legal history with his "original package" decision, which was upheld by the United States Supreme Court and has stood the test of time in all cases having to do with interstate commerce.

Literature of the nation and of the world has been enriched by the writings of Samuel L. Clemens, "Mark Twain," whose occupation as that of "antiquarian" is given in a city directory published by his brother Orion Clemens. Others in the literary field from Keokuk are Rupert Hughes and Cornelia L. Meigs. On the Keokuk Authors' Shelf in the Keokuk Public Library are the books of a score or more authors who claimed Keokuk as their home. The library was established in 1863 and became a free public library in 1894.

Ralph P. Lowe, governor of Iowa, lived for a time in Keokuk, his house being located at Third and Fulton streets, next door to the home of Gen. Belknap. Erie J. Leech was elected from Keokuk to be Grand Sire of the Sovereign Grand Lodge of Odd Fellows, in 1882. John N. Irwin was appointed territorial governor of Idaho and Arizona, and was also named minister to Portugal.

Keokuk audiences have thrilled to the performances of Ole Bull, Fritz Kreisler, and Ernestine

Schumann-Heink. Keokuk theaters have brought the great names of the stage. J. C. Hubinger built a mammoth amusement park in 1897, and in the huge Casino presented the Cherry Sisters as the Fourth of July attraction. Light opera and stock companies were billed for the Casino stage for several seasons. Two artificial lakes in the park provided bathing and boating, and there was space for a baseball field and race track. Keokuk always supported baseball and in 1875 was a member of the organization which afterwards became the nucleus of the National League.

Keokuk provided the grounds for the Iowa State Fair for four years, and one of the old buildings, the art hall, still is standing, used as a stock barn on a farm just outside the city limits. Physicians and surgeons in all parts of the country went to Keokuk Medical College, which was established in 1850. The first medical journal published west of the Mississippi was issued at Keokuk.

The appearance of the *Iowa Argus and Lee County Advertiser* and the *Keokuk Despatch* in 1846 marked the advent of local journalism.

Keokuk is, and has been, essentially a city of homes. Chivalry of the south, fire of the north, conservatism of the east, and progressiveness of the west have through more than a century forged the sinews of commerce, art, literature, and religion into the Gate City of the Hawkeye State.

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