

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XX ISSUED IN DECEMBER 1939 No. 12

COPYRIGHT 1939 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA



James Clarke

"I avail myself of the opportunity to say," spoke Governor James Clarke to the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Iowa on December 3, 1845, "that it will afford me great pleasure to coöperate with the Legislature in all measures calculated to exert a favorable influence upon the destinies of our Territory, and the happiness of its people." Of the new Governor's first message, former Governor John Chambers said: "It has a few strokes of demagogueism in it, but considering all things, might have been worse."

James Clarke was only thirty-three years old when he became Iowa's Chief Executive. His prevailing viewpoint was one of youthful optimism and idealism. In the editorial columns of his newspaper, he had continually fostered cultural development; he had tried to attract immigrants to Iowa; and he had proudly boasted of his home town of Burlington. Alert to the opportunities of the pioneer west, he was equally aware of current

problems. He was one of the first to foresee the trouble brewing over the disputed Iowa-Missouri boundary; he appreciated the need for a strong Chief Executive in the Territory; and he deplored the general tendency of legislatures to pass too many laws.

On the subject of slavery abolition he was particularly vehement, especially for one nurtured in the North. Concerning Elijah P. Lovejoy, a radical abolitionist in Illinois, Editor Clarke wrote: "We flattered ourselves that abolition had no votaries in this Territory, and above all, we did not believe that the proprietor of any newspaper would be willing to prostitute his columns to a purpose, at once so silly, unjust, impracticable and evil." And he concluded that the controversy between the slaveholders and abolitionists "will have a greater tendency than any other single cause, to produce the greatest political evil that could possibly befall us — a dissolution of the Union." That he was tolerant of slavery extension may be deduced from the fact that he accepted the Mexican War as a desirable means of conquest.

Whence came this perspicacious editor, promoter, imperialist, and politician? What environment and circumstances produced a pioneer so thoroughly interested in the public welfare, so active in cultural enterprises, so practical in judg-

ment? Who else would have had the vision to propose as early as September, 1838, the formation of a "Historical Society of Iowa" for the preservation of the epoch-making record of the founders of the Commonwealth?

Born in the Ligonier Valley, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, on July 5, 1812, James Clarke was the third son of John Clarke. Early in life the future Iowa Governor became a printer's apprentice and served in several localities. Eventually he was associated with a newspaper at Harrisburg.

James Clarke was ambitious to become a public official. Hopeful of achieving a career in law, he found this path blocked by a lack of money. Taking another course, he became a newspaperman and traveled that road to public service. In 1833, during the month of June, Newspaperman Clarke went to Philadelphia where he was introduced to General Andrew Jackson, then President of the United States. Might Old Hickory have inspired him to become a firm Democrat?

Like many other young men, James Clarke pondered the future possibilities of the West. It was not long before he decided to migrate to the valley of the Mississippi. Starting in the spring of 1836, he first stopped at the home of a brother at Madison, Indiana. Encouraged by the prospects, he

continued to Saint Louis, the most important center in the West, where he was readily employed by the *Missouri Republican*. Presently he wrote to his brother that he was earning twelve dollars a week, of which "he paid three dollars a week for board, and was saving money, and added that there were some excellent openings in the Upper Mississippi". If he could manage, he meant to take advantage of one of them.

His opportunity came soon. The Territory of Wisconsin, recently organized by Congress, was attracting hundreds of ambitious settlers. There was lead to be mined, land to be cultivated, and offices to be filled. And where politics flourished there was opportunity for printers. What better fortune could a prospective editor crave than to establish a newspaper at the new capital of Wisconsin Territory? With all his resources, James Clarke went to the infant town of Belmont, where he associated himself with John B. Russell.

In this little frontier community the First Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Wisconsin was convened by Governor Henry Dodge on October 25, 1836. On the same day, the first number of the *Belmont Gazette* appeared. The newspaper consisted of four pages, twenty-one by fourteen inches, six columns to a page. At once, the *Gazette* became the official press of the Territory.

On the western frontier, no newspaper could prosper without some of the government printing. Clarke and Russell were unusually fortunate: they printed the proceedings of both the Council and the House of Representatives, as well as the session laws in their paper. The *Belmont Gazette* received over \$2500 from the government of the Territory for printing. Meanwhile, however, hopes for the future of Belmont faded. Burlington was selected as the temporary capital, where the next session of the Legislative Assembly would meet. Consequently, James Clarke published the last issue of the *Belmont Gazette* in April, 1837, and moved to the new capital. He was perfectly certain that public printing was the life blood of a newspaper.

At the capital on the Mississippi he founded the *Wisconsin Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser* on July 10, 1837. Again anticipating the convening of the Territorial Legislative Assembly, he hoped to become the official printer. Early the next year his father in Pennsylvania wrote him a long letter: "I am highly pleased with your paper, and am led to think your Legislative body is getting along with as much order and dignity as in the older States, and perhaps a little more. I can hardly file your paper; the people here are so anxious to see it; they seem to consider

it as coming from beyond no place, and read it with avidity."

James Clarke's enterprise and ability attracted the attention of Governor Henry Dodge. On August 5, 1837, *The Western Adventurer* announced that "James Clarke, having been appointed by the Governor, Territorial Librarian, has just opened and arranged, in a convenient and handsome style, the new Territorial Library, in a large, airy and convenient front room, in the second story of the commodious house at the corner of Columbia and Main Streets" in Burlington. As his assistant, Clarke selected the youthful James W. Grimes.

On July 4, 1838, the part of Wisconsin Territory on the west side of the Mississippi became the Territory of Iowa. Clarke immediately changed the name of his paper to the *Iowa Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser*. From the beginning he had been attracted by the political destiny of the country west of the Mississippi. Indeed, Clarke was one of the leaders of the movement in the fall of 1837 to divide the Territory of Wisconsin. His political reward for this service, however, was not at once apparent. Busy with the onerous task of keeping a frontier newspaper alive, he seems to have had no time for public duties. Nevertheless, his partisanship kept him

in good standing with Democratic leaders. During the controversy between Secretary William B. Conway and Governor Robert Lucas, his sympathies were with the Governor. Some members of the Lucas faction suggested the removal of Conway and the appointment of Clarke as Secretary.

"The agents of the general government who are known to and have influence with the President", wrote Editor Clarke to his father on July 22, 1839, "have determined, I understand, to petition for his [Conway's] removal, and at the same time ask that I may be appointed in his stead. If tendered to me I would accept it, though I never expressed a desire to have it." Clarke concluded by adding that "Gov. Lucas also tendered to me the honorable appointment as one of his staff, which for reasons good and sufficient I declined."

In the following November, Secretary Conway died, and James Clarke was named Secretary of the Territory. Probably Henry Dodge and his son, Augustus C. Dodge, had much to do with the appointment. Inheriting a precarious condition in Territorial finances, caused by the imbroglio between his predecessor and the other governmental departments, he soon found that official business was as hard to conduct as a struggling frontier newspaper.

Upon assuming the duties of Territorial Secre-

tary, Clarke sold his interest in the *Gazette*. On December 21, 1839, James Clarke & Company was succeeded by John H. McKenny. In his farewell editorial Clarke stated that his paper had been partisan because the political conflict was "one of principle". The new owner announced that the "general character of the paper will remain unchanged" and that W. J. A. Bradford (first Supreme Court Reporter) would assist in the editorial department.

The year 1840 was an eventful one in the life of James Clarke. Besides attending to his official duties, he was active in other engagements, such as helping to organize the Masonic lodge at Burlington. Not the least of the interests that occupied the attention of the rising young statesman was his courtship of Christiana H. Dodge. He had probably met the Governor's daughter in 1836 when he was a printer at Belmont. Their friendship grew during the intervening years and on September 27, 1840, they were married by the Reverend Samuel Mazzuchelli at Dodge Grove, Wisconsin.

Secretary Clarke was instrumental in developing a spirit of partisan unity among Iowa Democrats, which culminated in a convention that supported his brother-in-law, Augustus C. Dodge, for the office of Territorial Delegate. Though Dodge

won his seat in Congress, the Whigs triumphed in other contests, and William Henry Harrison became President of the United States. As soon as he took office in 1841 John Chambers was appointed Governor of Iowa and O. H. W. Stull succeeded Clarke as Secretary of the Territory. Thereupon Clarke resumed his occupation of publishing the *Burlington Gazette*.

Retirement from office, however, did not reduce Clarke's interest in politics and civic improvements. As he had led in the formation of the Territory, so now he advocated Statehood. He attended Democratic conventions and in 1843 helped nominate Augustus C. Dodge again for the Territorial seat in Congress. In February, 1844, he demonstrated his personal popularity by being elected mayor of Burlington without opposition.

Meanwhile, the agitation for Statehood gained currency. In April, 1844, the people decided to frame a constitution and apply for admission to the Union. On October 7, 1844, the first Iowa Constitutional Convention met at Iowa City. Among the delegates was James Clarke. During the sessions of the Convention, he took an active part in the discussions. He served on the Credentials Committee, as well as being a member of the committees on the Judicial Department and on Suffrage and Citizenship. When the document

was drafted, James Clarke was one of the signers of the Iowa Constitution of 1844.

Although the first Iowa Constitution, as amended by Congress, was rejected by the people, James Clarke continued to play a leading rôle in the transition to Statehood. With the ascendancy of James K. Polk to the position of President, the Democrats returned to power. Again Editor Clarke interrupted his favorite occupation of publishing the *Gazette* to become the third Territorial Governor of Iowa on November 18, 1845.

In an editorial on Saturday, November 22, 1845, Clarke said of the *Gazette*: "It is the oldest paper in the Territory, and enjoys a support equal if not superior to any other. It has a subscription list of but little under 700; and as to advertising, the paper shows for itself." On Saturday, November 29th, the firm of S. R. Thurston and James Tizzard began publishing Iowa's most prominent newspaper.

Although Clarke's appointment was approved by many, it was criticized by some. Governor John Chambers recorded in the family record book: "Octr. 20th 1845 — Removed from office by President Polk, to make room for a political partizan. Let it be remembered that this removal from office was made without the imputation of improper conduct or of neglect of duty, or other

cause assigned." Some critics asserted that this appointment savored of nepotism. Ambitious politicians were inclined to resent the dominance of the Dodge dynasty. Founded by Henry Dodge, the family political fortunes were augmented by Augustus C. Dodge and James Clarke. Speaking of this dynasty, the *Davenport Gazette* on November 27, 1845, declared: "James Clarke, Esq., editor of the *Burlington Gazette*, has received a commission from the president of the United States appointing him to the office of governor of Iowa Territory. This makes the fifth member of the Dodge family who are now in possession of fat offices. Their aggregate salaries is about \$14,000! That family is pretty well provided for by the government."

Governor Clarke's tenure of office was dramatic. The Des Moines River improvement project was a live topic; the United States was at war with Mexico; and Iowa made the transition to Statehood. In his message of December 3, 1845, to the last Territorial Assembly James Clarke was hopeful for Iowa's early admission as a State. He nevertheless outlined a program for the legislature, especially deploring the growing public debt, the dangers of too much law making, and the policy of withholding mineral lands from pre-emption.

Governor Clarke was heartily in favor of internal improvements. When Congress made a land grant on July 8, 1846, for the purpose of improving the navigation of the Des Moines River, he promptly appointed Jesse Williams, Josiah H. Bonney, and Robert Cook to select the land.

But the patriotism stirred by the Mexican War dwarfed all other activity. On June 1, 1846, Governor Clarke issued a call for a regiment of Iowa volunteers. To ex-Governor John Chambers he offered the command of the Iowa troops. Severe illness, however, prevented the former Chief Executive from accepting. An additional company served as a frontier guard against the Indians at Fort Atkinson.

The formation of the State of Iowa was the most important event during Clarke's incumbency. At a Constitutional Convention which met in May, 1846, at Iowa City, a second organic law was formulated. On August 3rd the Constitution was approved at a general election. On September 9th, Governor Clarke issued a proclamation announcing the approval of the charter and appointing October 26th as the day for electing State officers. On December 2nd, Governor Clarke presented a farewell message to the First General Assembly of the State of Iowa, and on the following day Ansel Briggs was inaugurated

as the first Chief Executive of the State. On December 28th Iowa was formally admitted to the Union by Congress.

James Clarke returned to Burlington where he resumed his active interest in local affairs. A prominent Mason, he maintained his fraternal enthusiasm by being in regular attendance at the lodge meetings. In 1848 he again associated himself with the *Burlington Gazette*, and the same year he was a Vice President of the Democratic National Convention which nominated Lewis Cass for President.

The citizens of Burlington consolidated their public school districts in 1849. According to an early writer, the "first meeting under the new plan was held March 29, 1849, in the Congregational Church. James Clarke was chosen President; L. D. Stockton, Secretary; John Johnson, Treasurer, and James W. Grimes, Chairman of the Committee to inquire about the number of schools needed."

The normal course of events in Burlington was interrupted by an epidemic of cholera. On July 25, 1850, the *Burlington Hawk-Eye* exclaimed: "This terrible scourge still continues among us. We are unable to determine whether any abatement has taken place. Time alone, can solve this deeply interesting question. It is certain, however, that no

abatement has taken place since our last issue. The number of deaths from Cholera, since the 4th instant, we are creditably informed, amounted to sixty, up to the evening of the 23rd."

One of the first families stricken was that of James Clarke. The *Hawk-Eye* on August 1st revealed the tragic story: "After following to the grave the remains of a promising child on the 11 ult., and giving up to the embraces of the king of terrors a visitor at his house on the 13th, and his beloved wife on the 14th, Governor Clarke, after an illness of two weeks, superinduced mainly by his afflictions, was called to follow them on the 28th. He died at the residence of Judge Mason, where he spent the last twelve days of his life". Two daughters and a son survived.

The entire State was saddened with the ex-Governor's death. Citizens of Burlington met on Monday, July 29, 1850, at the law office of Grimes and Starr and organized the funeral services. Business houses were closed between ten-thirty and two o'clock. At eleven o'clock, the Reverend William Salter (who was later to write Clarke's biography in the *Iowa Historical Record* for January, 1888) conducted services at the Congregational Church. Pall-bearers were David Rorer, William H. Starr, J. C. Hall, M. D. Browning, A. W. Carpenter, O. H. W. Stull, John G. Foote,

and J. P. Wightman. At the church a procession led by "a band of music" formed and marched to the cemetery.

What shall be the final estimate of James Clarke? Shall it be that this "quiet kind of gentleman, slender and thin in build" was simply "very respectable"? Shall his services be measured by a county named in his honor? Shall he be remembered as the third Territorial Governor of Iowa? Most likely his permanent monument is the newspaper he founded. While he was its owner, the elegantly written editorial columns were filled with cultural ideals and ambitions for the future of Iowa. The present Burlington *Hawk-Eye Gazette* is the successor of James Clarke's *Wisconsin Territorial Gazette*.

JACK T. JOHNSON