

The Sale of Town Lots

It was in accordance with the provisions of statute law that Governor Lucas proclaimed on July 25, 1839, that two public sales of lots would be held at Iowa City—the first to commence on the third Monday of August, and the second on the first Monday of October following the date of his proclamation. After listing some two hundred lots as numbered on the map of Iowa City, mostly in the vicinity of Capitol Square, the Governor announced that the sale would be conducted under the direction of the commissioners who would make known “the terms of the several sales”.

Notice of the first sale of lots at Iowa City, which had been proclaimed throughout the Territory, was at the same time published in eastern papers. Everybody in Iowa seemed to have been informed of the coming event. As the date of the sale drew near, emigrant settlers and a few eastern capitalists appeared on the scene. Some came to buy sites for homes; others to speculate in town lots.

The problem of housing so large a number of strangers in a town with no real hotel was solved by the erection of “Lean Back Hall” on Linn Street

about where the police station is now located. According to tradition Lean Back Hall (which was hastily built in a few days) contained a bar, a dining room, one bedroom, and a kitchen. The bedroom, which was fifty or sixty feet in length, accommodated between thirty and forty men on a single bed—the bare floor.

On the morning of the first day of the sale a large number of persons assembled at Lean Back Hall. Many of the potential purchasers began the day with drinks. It was a jolly, good-natured crowd that listened to auctioneer Dougherty of Dubuque as he announced from a wagon in front of Lean Back Hall that the lots would be knocked down to the highest bidder; that the purchaser would be required to pay one-fourth of the price in cash, and the remainder in six, twelve, and eighteen months; that notes would be required in every case, payable to the Acting Commissioner or his successor at Iowa City; that a certificate of purchase would be given to purchasers, pledging the faith of the Territory for the execution of a deed in fee simple as soon as the title could be procured by the Territory from the government of the United States; that no deed would be given until all payments had been made; and finally, that on neglect or refusal to pay any or all installments, the lot would automatically revert to the Territory,

the purchaser losing all that he might have paid.

After this formidable announcement of the terms of sale, the wagon and auctioneer, with the crowd following, moved to a spot near the present location of the Presbyterian Church on north Clinton Street. There the first of the Iowa City lots was sold to L. D. Phillips for \$330. It was lot number eight in block eighty-six. Then the auctioneer, the wagon, and the crowd moved to block number eighty-nine where lot number one was knocked down for \$125 to G. W. Statton. The third move was to block ninety-seven where lot three was sold to Ewing and Chatham for \$265. In like manner a hundred other lots were offered and sold to the highest bidder. The first auction sale of real estate in Iowa City continued through three days.

In accordance with the Governor's proclamation the second sale of lots at Iowa City was begun on the first Monday of October, 1839. The procedure was the same as at the first sale; and 106 lots were sold on the same terms. According to Commissioner Chauncey Swan, certificates of sale were finally issued for 181 lots at the public sales of 1839 for which purchasers actually paid \$26,739.75.

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