Personalities and Progress

Antoine Le Claire was thirty-six years old when he built his home on the site where Winfield Scott negotiated the Black Hawk Purchase. Born at St. Joseph, Michigan, on December 15, 1797, he was the son of a French-Canadian. His mother was the granddaughter of a Potawatomi chief. In 1808 the elder Le Claire established a trading post at what is now Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A year later he formed connections with John H. Kinzie at Fort Dearborn. During his frontier wanderings, Antoine Le Claire apparently caught the ever-watchful eye of Governor William Clark of Missouri, who urged the young half-breed to enter the government service. Delighted with the opportunity, Antoine studied English and also mastered a dozen Indian dialects.

In 1818 Le Claire acted for a year as interpreter at Fort Armstrong. After a nine-year sojourn in Arkansas Territory, he returned to Fort Armstrong in 1827, serving as interpreter for the treaties made at Prairie du Chien in 1829, at Davenport in 1832 and 1836, at Washington, D. C. in 1837, and at the treaty of 1842 whereby the Sauks and Foxes relinquished their last claim to

land in Iowa. No man was more intimately associated with the Indians of Iowa than Antoine Le Claire; no man was more confidently trusted by them than he.

For almost three years Le Claire's cabin stood alone on the western bank of the Mississippi. Two settlers had staked out claims just west of Le Claire's grant early in 1833, but they quarrelled and Le Claire finally settled the dispute by paying them $150 for their squatter's rights in a quarter section of land in what is now downtown Davenport.

Antoine Le Claire lost no time in fencing his new land and cultivating part of it. In spite of the favorable location, however, settlement was slow. On February 23, 1836, several pioneers in the community met at the home of Colonel George Davenport on Rock Island to draw up a contract for laying out a town on a portion of Le Claire's land. They were wise in enlisting the support of the public-spirited Colonel Davenport.

George Davenport was born in England in 1783. As a lad he went to sea. While his vessel lay in New York harbor in 1804, young Davenport broke his leg in attempting to save a drowning sailor. He was left behind and, when he had recovered, enlisted in the United States army, serving as a regular soldier for approximately

twelve years. He was with General James Wilkinson at New Orleans, participated with distinction in Indian campaigns, and fought in the War of 1812. Following his discharge from the army he was employed by Colonel William Morrison of Kentucky as agent to supply troops with provisions.

Davenport arrived at Rock Island in the spring of 1816 with the troops that erected Fort Armstrong. For ten years he found lucrative private employment in the Indian trade. Joining the American Fur Company in 1826, Davenport held sway over an area ranging up and down the Mississippi from the mouth of the Iowa to the mouth of the Turkey River. He served as a quartermaster general during the Black Hawk War with the rank of colonel. In 1833 he built the residence on Rock Island which still stands, preserved as one of the historic spots of the upper Mississippi Valley. It was there that the projectors of the future town of Davenport met on that memorable winter day in 1836. Besides Davenport and Le Claire, four others were present: Levi S. Colton, Major William Gordon, Philip Hambaugh, and Alexander W. McGregor. Antoine Le Claire signed for Major Thomas Smith, who was absent. Captain James May was in Pittsburgh on business.

After considerable discussion it was finally de-

cided to purchase all of Le Claire's land lying along the Mississippi as far back as the bluff between what is now Harrison and Warren streets, an area approximately six blocks square. A price of $2000 for this tract was agreed upon, each man taking a one-eighth interest. It is alleged that Colonel Davenport urged that the town be named Le Claire, but the generous Antoine insisted it should be called Davenport in honor of the leading citizen in the vicinity.

In the spring of 1836 the town of Davenport was surveyed by Major William Gordon. According to legend the Major's vision was "much obscured" by firewater while performing this work, but a copy of the survey seems to indicate that his mind was quite clear and his hand steady. The original townsite included thirty-six blocks and six half blocks. It was bounded by Harrison on the east, Warren on the west, Seventh Street on the north, and the river on the south.

Lots were offered for sale in May, soon after the completion of the survey. A steamboat load of speculators (chiefly from St. Louis) put in at the Davenport levee and remained there throughout the sale to afford "the conveniences of lodging, edibles, and the not less essential item of drinkables." Although the auction continued two days, only fifty or sixty lots were sold, because the pur-

chasers feared the titles would be no better than a squatter's claim since this land was not a part of Le Claire's original grant from the government. The lots (84 feet by 150 feet) brought less than the townsite proprietors had expected.

While Burlington could boast sixteen stores, a half dozen groceries, six doctors, and five lawyers in the summer of 1836, Davenport consisted of only a few pioneer families. While Dubuque could rejoice over the establishment of the first newspaper in Iowa, Davenport had to be content with a few brief laudatory remarks by Lieutenant Albert M. Lea in his little book about the Iowa District. Those comments, however, must have lent courage and faith, both to the townsite owners and the first settlers.

Situated "nearly opposite" the lower end of Rock Island, wrote Lieutenant Lea, the new town was laid out on "high ground" with a "beautiful range of sloping hills" to the rear. Saint Louis lay "about 350 miles" downstream while the populous Galena-Dubuque lead mines were only a day's journey upstream by steamboat. The steamboat landing would have to be improved before the town would profit fully from its strategic location as a place of trans-shipment over the Upper Rapids. "Water-power, building stone, and bituminous coal are convenient," Lea concluded,

"and abundance of excellent timber is to be found on the hills and creeks of the vicinity."

By the close of 1836 pioneers had arrived who were destined to carve their names deep in the history of Iowa as well as Davenport. Ansel Briggs was destined to become the first Governor of the State of Iowa. G. C. R. Mitchell was not only elected mayor of Davenport, but also served in the Territorial legislature and as judge of the district court. The name of Ebenezer Cook, land agent, financier, and railroad builder, must forever be associated with the banking house of Cook & Sargent and with construction of the Rock Island railroad. Captain LeRoy Dodge was a successful steamboatman and farmer. Alexander W. McGregor, James M. Bowling, D. C. Eldridge, Jonathan W. Parker, and Roswell H. Spencer all contributed to the early development of Davenport.

Although no newspaper recorded the commonplace events of 1836, enough is known to indicate that the normal frontier activities occurred in the little community. On January 8, 1836, a pioneer ball was held at the home of Antoine Le Claire. The first "blessed event" was the birth of a male heir to Levi S. Colton. The first grog shop was opened by John Litch of Newburyport, New Hampshire. Antoine Le Claire established a ferry and became the first postmaster. G. C. R. Mitchell

and A. W. McGregor opened the first law offices. The first sermon was preached by E. M. Gavitt, a Methodist minister, in the home of D. C. Eldridge. Antoine Le Claire and George Davenport together built the first hotel at the corner of Front and Ripley streets.

In addition to such ordinary events the citizens of Davenport witnessed two colorful episodes in 1836 — the evacuation of Fort Armstrong and the purchase of the Keokuk Reserve from the Sauk and Fox Indians. In the presence of settlers from both sides of the river the troops embarked on May 4th for Fort Snelling. It must have been a memorable occasion. One lady present recorded her feelings in an "elegant poetical effusion" entitled "Farewell to Fort Armstrong" in the *Army and Navy Register* of May 19, 1836.

Will the banner that waved ever deck thee again
Or the drum's deep toned note waken echo around;
Will the few here enroll'd for their country and fame,
E'er meet on this spot at the war-trump's shrill sound?

The cession of the Keokuk Reserve on September 28, 1836, was undoubtedly a colorful episode. The treaty council brought together on the present soil of Davenport many notable figures in Iowa and upper Mississippi Valley history. Henry Dodge, Governor of the Territory of Wisconsin, negotiated the treaty whereby the Sauks

and Foxes gave up the four hundred square miles of land along the Iowa River that had been awarded to Keokuk at the close of the Black Hawk War. The treaty was signed by such mighty warriors as Keokuk, Appanoose, and Pashepaho for the Sauks and Wapello and Poweshiek for the Foxes. Black Hawk himself was present, a silent, sorrowful spectator, standing immobile on the outskirts of the throng while his former rival negotiated the treaty. James W. Grimes served as secretary of the commission, and Antoine Le Claire acted as interpreter. Among the witnesses were George Davenport, Joseph M. Street, George Catlin, the American artist, George W. Atchison, James Craig, and Jeremiah Smith — all well-known in the Iowa District.

During the next four years the growth of population was slow. Possessing no rich lead mines like Dubuque, nor the prestige of being the Territorial capital like Burlington, the struggling community was also hampered by the proximity of the aspiring rival town of Stephenson. A number of Stephenson merchants advertised their wares in the *Iowa Sun,* thus competing with Davenport business men and discouraging others from investing their capital. The withering blight of the Panic of 1837 meant that there was "no money,

no credit, nor any produce to bring supplies to the infant colony."

Nevertheless, new industries were founded. In 1837 D. C. Eldridge established the first flour mill — a Getty's Patent Metallic Mill said to be scarcely larger than a coffee mill and propelled by a horse. Harvey Leonard, an Indianian, opened the first brickyard on Sixth Street between Main and Harrison, and presently D. C. Eldridge began building the first brick house. By 1840 this industry was important enough to be recorded in the Federal census. Seventeen brick houses were erected during the year 1843.

The growth and economic progress of the town continued during 1838 and 1839. D. C. Eldridge opened a carriage and blacksmith shop near his home. He made or repaired steel springs in good style and constructed all kinds of sleighs. His business was in such a flourishing condition that he employed a number of first-rate journeymen, and hoped to merit the patronage of a generous public. The appearance of the *Iowa Sun and Davenport and Rock Island News* on August 4, 1838, introduced an economic as well as a cultural factor in Davenport's development. In the following spring, after the opening of navigation, the newly incorporated town was thronged with travelers and emigrants." According to the hyperbol-

ical *Iowa Sun* in April, 1839, the demand for houses was so great that a new one would have to be completed daily to accommodate the settlers. Forty or fifty lots had been sold during the previous week.

Colonel Davenport and Antoine Le Claire were still the leading merchants and land owners. These two entrepreneurs advertised extensively in the *Iowa Sun*. Thus, Davenport had a "commodious Store House" for rent on Front Street; Le Claire warned settlers not to cut timber or cordwood off any of his land. Together they advertised lumber, shingles and sash, salt, nails, glass, and white lead, ready-made clothing, saddlery, hardware, drugs, groceries, provisions, and liquor for sale at their store. At the same time these two energetic empire builders were also devoting their "particular attention" to the forwarding and commission business for the "Upper or Back Country".

By 1840 the population of Davenport was about six hundred, or far behind that of Burlington or Dubuque. There were eight mercantile establishments, four groceries, a brewery, and two hotels, including the $35,000 Le Claire House. Despite the slow growth of the town, however, Davenport and Scott County led the twenty other counties in the Territory of Iowa in the amount of money in-

vested in industry and manufacturing — $49,350 of the total of $199,645 in the whole Territory. Three-fourths of this capital, or $39,050, was invested in two flour mills, three grist mills, and nine sawmills. The brick and lime works employed twenty-five men and manufactured products valued at $10,000 annually on an investment of $8000. The distillery employed two men and manufactured products valued at $2310 on a $1000 capitalization. A glass and earthenware establishment employed only two men and had a total capitalization of $300.

According to a local historian, Antoine Le Claire received a commission as the first postmaster at Davenport on April 19, 1836. The mail came to Stephenson, and the postmaster brought letters to Davenport in his coattails. On February 15, 1838, D. C. Eldridge was appointed postmaster at Davenport. At the end of September that year Postmaster Eldridge listed the names of forty-two individuals who had letters awaiting them in the postoffice. According to the *Iowa Sun* in December the mail arrived and departed biweekly to the east via Stephenson, north via Dubuque, west via Sanbornton, and south via Burlington.

By 1837 the steamboat traffic along the eastern border of Iowa had increased to such proportions

the United States government sent Lieutenant Robert E. Lee to make a survey of the Des Moines and Rock rapids. Lee estimated that these two impediments to navigation could be improved at a cost of $344,280, and work was begun on the lower rapids in the following year. During 1838 twenty-eight different steamboats plied the upper Mississippi, many discharging their tribute of freight and passengers at Davenport.

The ferry operated between Stephenson and Davenport by John Wilson in 1838 was a boon to business. This energetic pioneer advertised "two good Ferry Flats, besides several small Boats" which he promised to hold in "readiness to accommodate the public" at all times. Wilson hoped by "industry and perseverance to merit and receive the patronage of travellers and emigrants." He also had a steam ferry under construction which would make the Davenport crossing unsurpassed. An unhappy aftermath of the establishment of Wilson's ferry was the suspicion that Alexander W. McGregor, a member of the Territorial legislature, had been paid to obtain the license. He was charged with "receiving a bribe" and was branded as "unworthy and undeserving" of the confidence of the House of Representatives.

While concerned with the things of this life, the Davenport pioneers did not forget the more stately

mansions of another world. As early as 1836 emissaries of the Methodist, the Episcopal, and the Roman Catholic churches had conducted services in private homes. Michael Hummer organized the Presbyterian Church early in 1839. Ground was broken for St. Anthony's Catholic Church on April 27th. A Congregational Sunday School was formed in May, 1839, and a church organization of twelve members was consummated on July 30th. Five days earlier, sixteen Disciples of Christ formed the Christian Church at the home of D. C. Eldridge. Calvary Baptist Church was organized in September with nine members. In December a preacher of the Dutch Reformed Church delivered a sermon in Samuel Barkley's hotel.

Education was not forgotten. The aged father of Alexander W. McGregor is said to have taught the first school at Davenport, although C. H. Eldridge, a schoolboy of the thirties, assigned this honor to Miss Marianna Hall. Miss Hall taught school during the summer of 1838 in a little twelve-by-fourteen log cabin that had originally been built for a blacksmith shop. The cabin had an earth floor, two windows, and a slab door with a wooden latch. The Reverend Michael Hummer opened a school during the summer of 1839 and Father Pelamourgues taught a dozen children in the old brick church.

Meanwhile, higher education was not neglected. On January 19, 1838, the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Wisconsin established the Davenport Manual Labor College for "the promotion of the general interests of education, and to qualify young men to engage in the several employments and professions of society, and to discharge honorably and usefully the various duties of life."

A Lyceum was organized in Davenport late in 1839. In December, however, the *Iowa Sun* asserted that the original high purpose of the Lyceum had so degenerated that only subjects were discussed which would "tickle the fancy" of the "weak females" present. "If courtship is a science", editor Andrew Logan remarked, "then indeed is our Lyceum a most excellent school."

The resourceful Davenport pioneers utilized every element of their social life as a vehicle for fun. Log raisings and housewarmings, quilting bees and paring bees, spelling bees and temperance lectures, lyceums and militia meets, births, marriages, and deaths afforded occasions for social intercourse. Hunting and fishing supplied food for the family larder as well as sport for local Nimrods. In 1838 two Davenport duck hunters were drowned in a small pond in the neighborhood of the Wapsipinicon River. On December

25, 1839, the *Iowa Sun* invited sportsmen to assemble at the home of Alexander W. McGregor on New Year's morning to join in a wolf hunt. Participants were requested to provide their own guns, horses, and dogs.

On August 31, 1838, the American Arena Company performed to an enthusiastic Davenport audience. Equipped to accommodate a thousand spectators, the proprietors modestly admitted their "world wonder" was "not excelled" by any circus. A military band, beautiful and "sagacious" horses, distinguished riders, and a "humorous and facetious" clown were attractions that could be enjoyed for the small sum of fifty cents. On November 5, 1840, a town trustee moved that theatrical performances should no longer be exempt from taxation as before.

In 1840, after five years of steady growth, the population of Davenport was only about six hundred. During the forties the growth of the town continued to be slow, only 1848 being recorded in 1850 compared with 4082 for Burlington. During the fifties the white tide broke in surging waves so that the census of 1860 revealed 11,267 inhabitants in the Queen City of the West compared with 6706 in Burlington. By 1880 Davenport could count 21,831 souls and had almost overtaken Dubuque. In 1930 the census showed Dav-

enport with 60,751, or almost equal the combined population of Dubuque and Burlington, her principal rivals of pioneer days. It was the wisdom and faith of the founding fathers, their boundless energy and unwavering courage, that had nourished this young giant. The same sterling qualities were exhibited by those who followed. Small wonder that Davenport should now be the largest city on the Mississippi between Saint Louis and Saint Paul.

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