

Jesse Williams

Land was pioneer gold. To the West came frontiersmen seeking homes and speculators in quest of profits. Associated with these men was the land agent, an individual skilled in the brokerage of the soil. The successful realtor in pioneer times was by nature a promoter, one who had infinite faith in the future of the country, the optimism of a crusader, and the instincts of a gambler. Such a person was Jesse Williams.

When Williams arrived in the Territory of Iowa he was already acquainted with land transactions. It was Governor Robert Lucas who discovered young Williams (then in his twenties) in Surveyor General William Lytle's office in Cincinnati, Ohio. Lucas invited Williams to go with him to Iowa.

At five-thirty on the afternoon of August 1, 1838, Governor Lucas and Jesse Williams left Cincinnati on the steamboat *Tempest*. Bound for Iowa Territory in their company was Theodore S. Parvin. During the slow journey down the Ohio and up the Mississippi rivers, Williams and Parvin, because of the bonds of youth, became close friends. It was soon after the steamboat *Brazil*

arrived in Burlington on August 15, 1838, that the two young men's association with Lucas became known to the citizens of the Territory and they were immediately stamped as the Governor's protégés.

The first task that confronted the Governor upon his arrival was the selection of a temporary capital of the Territory. In order to perform this duty Lucas made a tour of the principal towns, and his two aides went along. It was a gala trip. Everywhere prominent citizens entertained the Governor, and his young friends made the best of their opportunity to make acquaintances and explore the new country.

After a twelve-day reconnaissance, the Governor selected Burlington as the Territorial capital. Thereupon the citizens of that town tendered the Chief Executive a banquet. Present at the affair on the afternoon of September 4th was Jesse Williams. In the program of toasts Williams proposed: "*Iowa Territory* — Unsurpassed in the fertility of her soil, her resources endless. May her public functionaries be actuated alone by the purest and most elevated principles of patriotism, in preparing her for a *future State*." Already he was exhibiting the enthusiasm of the land agent.

Following preparatory formalities, the new government went into action. Governor Lucas

was also Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Territory. During his administration there were no uprisings to suppress or land cessions to negotiate, but the payment of annuities and the protection of the Indians against unscrupulous traders and liquor debauchery required constant attention and extensive correspondence for which the Governor needed an able assistant. It was to serve as clerk in the office of Indian affairs that Lucas brought Williams to Iowa. After the Governor quarreled with the Secretary of the Territory, the burden of some of the Secretary's duties fell upon Williams. He kept the *Executive Journal*, attended to some of the Governor's correspondence, and carried messages. His official title, according to Isaac Galland's *Iowa Emigrant*, was Messenger in the Indian Department. For this work the Secretary of the Treasury allowed him a salary of \$365 a year.

Perhaps the most exciting episode that occurred while Williams served as Territorial Messenger was the Iowa-Missouri boundary fracas. In that affair he held the rank of a colonel in the Iowa militia. Apparently, however, he was not in command of a regiment, but acted as a military aide on the staff of the Governor. His duties were still messengerial. A commentator said he stood by his chief "tall as a mast, straight as a bolt".

Political fortunes changed in Iowa, but the lure of the land remained. On January 7, 1840, the Legislative Assembly created the position of Territorial Auditor. To this post, with the consent of the Council, Governor Lucas appointed Jesse Williams. The duties of the Auditor were to "sign all warrants for money on the treasurer of the territory, all tax receipts and all other papers necessary and proper for the auditor to sign." His office was to be at the seat of government and his salary fixed at \$100 a year.

On December 12, 1841, Auditor Williams made his annual report. In it he described an ingenious plan he had adopted for financing the construction of the capitol at Iowa City. Laborers were paid in certificates of indebtedness receivable at the Auditor's office. Inasmuch as many of the citizens of Iowa City had purchased lots from the Territory and still owed a portion of the purchase price, these certificates passed at par. In other words, the laborers received these notes for their services, transferred them to storekeepers for goods, and the local merchants handed them to the Auditor in payment for their lots. One may surmise that Williams was more of a schemer than an accountant, because his successor, John Coleman, complained that the Auditor's accounts had not been kept meticulously.

During the time he was Territorial Auditor, and because of his experience with land affairs, Jesse Williams compiled *A Description of the United States Lands in Iowa*. The one-hundred-eighty-page book, published by J. H. Colton in 1840, was bound in blue paper and contained a detailed map signed by Jesse William, "late a Clerk in the Surveyor General's Office, Cincinnati". According to the author, the volume included "a minute description of every section and quarter section, quality of soil, groves of timber, prairies, ledges of rock, coal banks, iron and lead ores, water-falls, mill-seats, etc." The skill in compiling the information from the records of the United States survey testifies for Williams's training. There was truth in the statement by the author that the "book and map will furnish the possessor with more information concerning Iowa than can be obtained from any other source."

Meanwhile, the Territory of Iowa had authorized a three-man commission to select a site for the permanent location of the seat of government. A section of land was donated by the United States government to be platted as a town and sold to the inhabitants of the capital. Proceeds from the sale of lots would, it was hoped, provide funds for the erection of a suitable capitol.

It was natural that, when the Legislative As-

sembly on January 14, 1841, created the position of Territorial Agent, a man well informed on public land policy and conditions in Iowa, like Jesse Williams, should be appointed to the post. In addition to his duties as Auditor, Williams as Territorial Agent was responsible for the financial operations involved in the sale of lots at Iowa City and the construction of the capitol. Laborers could be paid with Territorial warrants, but the purchase of material required cash. For this purpose, Agent Williams, upon the authority of an act of the legislature, borrowed \$5500 from the Miners' Bank of Dubuque, pledging as security "the faith of the unsold lots of Iowa City". In spite of diligent efforts, however, the sale of lots failed to produce enough revenue to pay expenses. By December, 1841, Agent Williams reported a deficit of \$10,714.91, and recommended that the minimum price of lots be reduced. Early in 1842 John Coleman replaced Jesse Williams as Territorial Agent. A year later, on January 23, 1843, Williams surrendered the office of Territorial Auditor to William L. Gilbert.

Meanwhile, he had become interested in journalism. On October 1, 1842, he bought Ver Planck Van Antwerp's share in the *Iowa Capitol Reporter*. With Thomas Hughes he continued the newspaper as "the devoted, and uncompromising

advocate of the great principles of the Democratic party." Perhaps he expected the publishing business to be profitable. "Colonel Williams", wrote Van Antwerp, "is favorably known throughout the Territory, not only as a gentleman of great worth, and probably without a personal enemy, among those whose respect is worth possessing — certainly without deserving to have one — but as one possessed of a handsome order of talents, and who has performed with fidelity, and promptitude, a most important public trust, that of Agent for the Territory in the erection of the Public Buildings."

Of his own political affinity, Williams told his readers: "In advocating, to the best of our abilities, the principles and interests of the great democratic party, and supporting, in a fearless and independent manner, the principles of the great party with which it has ever been our duty as well as our pleasure to act, it will be our object to treat our political opponents with that regard which is ever due between gentlemen, however much they may differ in their political principles and opinions."

In his newspaper Williams also expounded some of his theories of real estate. He believed that the increment derived from the increased value of land due to favorable environment was a

legitimate form of wealth. The pioneer might rightfully plan to profit by the settlement of the country. Williams favored preëmption rights and was therefore pleased when Congress gave squatters the privilege of buying their claims at the minimum price without competition. Moreover, as an investor, he thought the creditor who held a land mortgage ought to be fully protected by law.

However else the editorial policies of pioneer editors might be characterized, they certainly were vigorous and candid. In 1843 the *Capitol Reporter* accused members of the legislature of accepting bribes to vote against repealing the charter of the Miners' Bank of Dubuque. This was indignantly denied in the Assembly, but the indictment caused an investigation. Eventually the legislators were exonerated. The House of Representatives discussed a Whig resolution that the charge in the *Iowa Capitol Reporter*, "implicating members with having been influenced in their legislative action, by promises of personal reward and private advantage, as entirely untrue, and highly reprehensible in its character, and, therefore, we deem the editors justly deserving the censure of this house." Such partisan tactics on the part of Williams gave rise to the statement that "as a journalist he had no superior in the management of a political paper."

Journalism and politics, however, never eliminated his primary interest in the development of the Territory. In May, 1844, he served as one of the commissioners to locate the county seat of Mahaska County. With Ebenezer Perkins and Thomas Henderson, he selected the site that was to become Oskaloosa. On June 1, 1844, Williams became the sole owner of the *Iowa Capital Reporter* with the hope of making "his paper a fitting organ of the Democracy, at the seat of government."

That Jesse Williams chose political preferment to journalism can not be doubted. During the summer of 1843 he wrote to his uncle in Cincinnati concerning a rumor that the Secretary of the Territory, O. H. W. Stull, might be removed, and thus create a vacancy in an attractive office. But his uncle responded that no change was contemplated — "none as to the Govr. at least and probably none as to Secretary." This information proved to be erroneous. Before the summer was over Samuel J. Burr became Secretary. Williams bided his time. The national election in 1844 returned the Democratic party to power, and presently Jesse Williams was rewarded with the coveted office of Territorial Secretary. In April, 1845, he sold a share in his newspaper to A. H. Palmer and in June of that year, upon being named

Secretary, he disposed of his remaining interest to his partner and quit the publishing business.

John Chambers was not replaced by a Democratic Governor of Iowa until November, 1845. An anecdote concerning the association of Chambers and Williams was related by William Penn Clarke. Though probably apocryphal, it may be indicative of the personality of the two men. Williams, according to the story, had prepared some documents, as was his custom, and affixed his signature with his usual flourish. Governor Chambers, opposed to ostentation, looked at the autograph and called the Secretary. Pointing to the signature, he said, "Do you know what that stands for, Mr. Williams?" The Secretary merely stammered. "That", said Chambers, indicating the flourish, "means damn fool." Williams, according to tradition, had a more modest signature after that rebuff.

Jesse Williams's tenure as Secretary was brief. The admission of Iowa into the Union as a State in 1846 legislated him out of office. With his political activities interrupted and his newspaper sold, he turned again to his original interest in land and land speculation.

It was during the decade of the forties that Iowa promoted one of its most gigantic schemes of internal improvement — the project of making the

Des Moines River navigable. In 1846 Congress donated land along the river to finance the dredging and construction of levees and dams. Governor James Clarke appointed Jesse Williams, Josiah H. Bonney, and Robert Cock, to select the land. Acting in accordance with the Congressional statute, the committee chose the odd numbered sections in the specified area on each side of the river.

After Iowa became a State, the General Assembly of Iowa created the Board of Public Works to promote the Des Moines River improvement. For a one year term, beginning in 1849, Jesse Williams served on this board and fostered a scheme to secure the necessary funds for the river project.

Work on the Des Moines River improvement plunged Williams into the midst of land speculation. He himself is said to have made thousands of dollars on river improvement lands. Well qualified by temperament, it was to be expected that he made the most of his opportunity. Letters by him and by his friends suggest that he considered investment in land, both direct and in mortgages, an excellent way to make a fortune. This attitude naturally led him to ally himself with other persons whose views were similar.

About 1850, Jesse Williams went to Fairfield

where he joined Bernhart Henn who was experienced in the land office at that city. The two men formed the firm of Henn, Williams and Company. In 1851, with George D. and Edward A. Temple, they organized the first bank in Fairfield — a concern which came to be one of the principal banking houses in the State.

Henn and Williams continued their promotional schemes. In January, 1854, Major William Williams purchased the site of Fort Dodge for the Fort Dodge Company, a majority interest of which was controlled by the Fairfield firm. The purpose of the Fort Dodge Company, and others like it, was to lay out towns at strategic places, sell lots, and, if a railroad came through or immigrants found the place attractive, reap a big profit from the rapid increase in land values.

At the same time that he was involved in these financial adventures, Jesse Williams associated himself with Enos Lowe, S. S. Bayliss, J. A. Jackson, Samuel R. Curtis, W. W. Brown, S. M. Ballard, and J. H. D. Street, to incorporate the Council Bluffs and Nebraska Ferry Company. For twenty years (1854–1874) this steam ferry did a lucrative business transporting emigrants and their possessions across the Missouri River. Meanwhile, Williams was speculating in the development of Council Bluffs, Omaha, and Sioux

City. He and Henn demonstrated their opportunism by organizing the Rocky Mountain Real Estate Company, operating a bank in Omaha, and controlling the Sioux City Land and Ferry Company. Williams was one of the original proprietors of Sioux City. He must have been very active in his agency, for he was a "well known character" in Council Bluffs, Omaha, and Sioux City. His associates remembered him as "a fine portly gentleman" who was "high-minded, clear-thinking and genial".

After his Omaha bank failed in the panic of 1857, Williams's fortune gradually melted away. According to one historian, he "was unfortunate in business during the later years of his life" and, toward the end, was "dependent upon the kindness of friends for pecuniary assistance." He died in Omaha on July 18, 1879, after a week's illness with erysipelas.

Often confused with Joseph Williams, the Territorial Judge, Jesse Williams nevertheless had a distinctive and rather remarkable career. Edward Stiles declared that he "was large-hearted, generous, and had many warm, personal friends. He was a man of high character and strictly honorable. He never married."

JACK T. JOHNSON