

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Census of 1840

Just a century ago, on June 1, 1840, the first federal census in the Territory of Iowa was started. Due to the sparsely populated areas and slow transportation, that census was not taken as rapidly as the one of 1940. Instead of collecting the population statistics in one month, the sixth United States enumeration was to be "completed and closed within five calendar months thereafter", that is, November 1, 1840.

Then, as now, the newspapers informed the people about the questions to be asked. Since Iowa was primarily rural, many questions pertaining to agriculture were published. "In taking the census for 1840," wrote the editor of the *Dubuque Iowa News* on June 16th, "the persons employed for that purpose, will ask of every farmer questions to the following effect: What is the number of your horses, neat cattle, sheep, swine? How many bushels of wheat were produced on your farm in 1839? How many of barley, oats, rye,

buckwheat, potatoes, Indian corn? How many pounds of wool, hops, wax, tobacco, rice, cotton, silk cocoons, sugar? How many tons of hay, of hemp, and flax? How many cords of wood have you sold during the year? How many gallons of wine have you made? What is the value of the products of your dairy — of your orchard — of your home made or family goods?"

Some sections of the press were opposed to this "prying" of government into private affairs. Critics a hundred years ago rivaled those of the current census. One prominent newspaper declared that it was unworthy of "the dignity and high functions of the Federal Government to pursue such petty investigations". No trace of such opposition, however, can be found in the Iowa papers of that time. Instead, the *Iowa Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser* on February 6, 1841, commented favorably on the questions. "The census of 1840", in the opinion of the editor, would mark an era in the history of American agriculture and would "furnish a more correct view of our country — our whole country, in this respect than has ever been given. . . . There can be no doubt that the tables which are provided from these returns will furnish abundant matter for the consideration of the statesman as well as the agriculturist; and probably the example now

first set of such an enumeration of the products of labor, will be followed at each succeeding census of this great nation."

Iowa was growing rapidly. On October 20, 1840, about the time the whole census was to be completed, the *Iowa News* reported that "Ten years ago this most beautiful territory was unsettled by white population, and known only to the Indian Trader." Four days later the *Burlington Gazette* announced that in 1838 Iowa Territory, when it broke away from Wisconsin, had a population "a little rising of 23,000. Since then (within two years) it has more than doubled and now comprises quite if not more than fifty thousand people." Fifty thousand seems to have been the goal of local promoters, but it was a little too high. When the enumeration was finished, Iowa Territory was reported to have a population of 43,112. Wisconsin had only 30,945. The four most populous States were, in order, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Virginia. In the whole United States, there were 17,069,453 inhabitants.

United States marshals were responsible for collecting the census data in 1840. In Iowa that office was held by Francis Gehon. He received \$250 for supervising the enumeration. To make the actual count he was authorized "to appoint one or more assistants in each city and county" who

were required to perform their duty by visiting "every dwelling house, or by personal inquiry of the head of every family." The law stipulated that the census takers should list the population according to sex, age, color, and whether negroes were free or slave. Indians were not counted at all. "Two copies of the returns of the enumeration and statistical tables" were delivered to the marshal and he, within a month, had to transmit one copy, together with the totals of the different classes for the Territory, to the Secretary of State and file the other copy with the clerk of the Supreme Court of the Territory. The enumerators were paid two dollars for every 100 persons counted. "Each and every free person more than sixteen years of age" was required to answer the census questions "to the best of his or her knowledge", or be subject to a fine of twenty dollars.

The enumeration in the Territory was made by counties, of which only eighteen of the twenty-two that had been established by law were included. The boundaries of Fayette, Buchanan, Benton, and Keokuk had not yet been definitely prescribed nor had the government of those counties been organized. For political purposes they were attached to adjoining counties on the east. None of them was reported to have any inhabitants in 1838, and if any settlers had made claims

there by 1840 they were either ignored by the federal census takers or counted in the population of the counties to which they were attached.

The following summary by counties according to color and sex is computed from the *Compendium* of the sixth United States census.

Counties	White Persons		Negroes		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Cedar	717	536	—	—	1,253
Clayton	771	323	3	4	1,101
Clinton	472	339	3	7	821
Delaware	106	62	—	—	168
Des Moines	3,052	2,519	3	3	5,577
Dubuque	1,742	1,245	36	36	3,059
Henry	2,016	1,740	13	3	3,772
Jackson	802	599	5	5	1,411
Jefferson	1,515	1,258	—	—	2,773
Johnson	963	525	2	1	1,491
Jones	289	182	—	—	471
Lee	3,351	2,731	4	7	6,093
Linn	795	577	1	—	1,373
Louisa	1,069	841	8	9	1,927
Muscatine	1,074	843	15	10	1,942
Scott	1,217	915	4	4	2,140
Van Buren	3,412	2,732	2	—	6,146
Washington	893	701	—	—	1,594
<i>Totals</i>	24,256	18,668	99	89	43,112

It is apparent that settlement was developing most rapidly in the interior counties, indicating that most of the immigrants were farmers interest-

ed in claiming the best land available. The total population of the Territory increased over eighty-five per cent between 1838 and 1840, but the population of Jones, Linn, Cedar, and Johnson counties increased 370 per cent. According to the Territorial census of 1838 the most populous counties were, in order of size, Des Moines, Van Buren, Henry, and Lee — the four southeastern counties. Two years later the same counties led in population but the order was changed. Van Buren was first, followed by Lee, Des Moines, and Henry. The sixth county in number of inhabitants in 1840 was Jefferson, established in 1839, just west of Henry. It included three townships that had formerly belonged to Henry, which no doubt accounted for its immediate importance in population. Moreover, both Henry and Jefferson were inland counties, subject probably to the same influences that contributed to the rapid settlement of similarly situated counties farther north.

Of the 43,112 persons living in the Territory of Iowa, 24,355 were males and 18,757 were females. This proportion was approximately four to three, as it had been in 1838. If adults only are considered, however, the ratio of men to women in 1840 was about seven to four. Over half the white inhabitants of Iowa were under twenty years of age — 23,448 of the 42,924. These were almost even-

ly divided between the sexes, 12,172 being boys and 11,276 girls.

As might be expected in a pioneer country, the largest age-group of men was between the ages of twenty and thirty (6207) and the next largest between thirty and forty (3310). Women, though less numerous, followed the same age pattern — 3789 between the ages of twenty and thirty and 1865 between thirty and forty. The number of both men and women in the next two decennial age-groups declined sharply. There were only 2210 men and 1473 women between the ages of forty and sixty. The frontier was not attractive to persons beyond the prime of life. Relatively few white persons were over sixty — 357 men and 245 women — parents and grandparents probably who had come west with their children. No men in Iowa were over ninety, but one old lady in Dubuque, living with the family of Alexander Butterworth, was over a hundred. Perhaps she was the "Old Lady in Dubuque" for whom the *New Yorker* is not edited.

The negro population of the Territory of Iowa was not large — 172 "free colored persons" and sixteen slaves. In 1838, however, there were only 112 free negroes in Iowa. Perhaps the influx of colored persons from the slave States was already well started. Dubuque, Muscatine, Louisa, and

Henry counties contained most of the colored population. There were no negroes in Cedar, Delaware, Jefferson, Jones, and Washington counties. Though Iowa was free territory, six male and ten female persons were held in servitude. Of these a boy and a girl were under ten years of age. All of them lived in Dubuque County. George W. Jones owned three slaves; F. K. O'Ferrall, Thomas McKnight, and [S. D.] Dixon owned two each; while John Thompson, [P. A.] Lorimier, Maria Garteell [?], William Roberts, John Smith, Mary La Saude, and one whose name was torn off the original record owned one slave each. Mary La Saude was a free colored woman. Her slave was listed as male.

In addition to population figures, the census takers were required by law to collect "all such information in relation to mines, agriculture, commerce, manufactures, and schools, as will exhibit a full view of the pursuits, industry, education and resources of the country". This data was separated from the population enumeration and published in another part of the census "Compendium". Some of these industrial statistics did not correspond with figures pertaining to population in another place. For example, the number of persons employed in various occupations did not agree with the totals listed in the population

tables. Perhaps the information was inadequately or erroneously tabulated by the marshals.

The predominant industry in Iowa was, of course, agriculture. In 1840, nearly eighty per cent of the people listed as being employed (10,469 out of 13,126) were farming. The major crop was "Indian corn", of which 1,406,241 bushels were produced in 1839. Potatoes must have been an important item in pioneer diet because 234,063 bushels were raised in Iowa, ranking next to corn in bulk. The third largest crop was oats, 216,385 bushels being produced in 1839. Wheat was next with a yield of 154,693 bushels. Though other crops were probably not as essential, all contributed to the economic welfare of the Territory. Production in 1839 was as follows: 17,953 tons of hay, 6212 bushels of buckwheat, 3792 bushels of rye, 728 bushels of barley, 41,452 pounds of sugar, 23,039 pounds of wool, 8076 pounds of tobacco, 2132 pounds of wax, 83 pounds of hops, and 7304 cords of wood sold. The population of Johnson County must have been concentrated in the capital, for corn, potatoes, wheat, and wax were the only crops reported. Iowa produced no wine, cotton, rice, or silk cocoons.

More swine were raised on Iowa farms than any other kind of livestock, probably to consume the corn and provide pork and lard for domestic

use. Hogs numbered 104,899. "Neat cattle" were next, of which the census takers counted 38,049. There were 15,354 sheep, 10,794 horses and mules, and the estimated value of poultry of all kinds was \$16,539.

Manufacturing and trades furnished the livelihood for 1629 persons, next to agriculture the most available form of employment, yet less than one-sixth as important as farming. Among articles manufactured in Iowa a hundred years ago, candles figured prominently. Besides innumerable home-made tallow-dips and other varieties, 4718 pounds of candles were made for market. Soap was another pioneer product, though only 9740 pounds, or about a fifth of a pound per person, were manufactured — all in Clayton County. Evidently the housewives of 1840 had to make their own soap or depend upon the storekeeper to get a supply from the East.

Milling was the most extensive manufacturing industry, employing 154 men. There were two flour mills in Cedar County, two in Dubuque County, and two in Scott County, of which the four latter produced 4340 barrels of flour. Thirty-seven grist mills and seventy-five sawmills were reported, though strangely none was found in Delaware and Lee counties.

Apparently the statistics are inaccurate, but at

least sixty-seven men earned their living from the "products of the forest". Lumber valued at \$50,280 and furs worth \$33,594 were produced in 1839. Most of the furs came from Clayton County, as might be expected, and Jackson County led in lumber, though Cedar was a close second. Building flourished on the frontier. According to the census, 324 men built 483 wooden houses and fourteen houses of brick and stone, which is probably too few because eight counties furnished no statistics on house construction.

While manufacturing was in its infancy the printing trade was also being established. The four weekly newspapers employed fifteen persons in the summer of 1840. In October, about the time the census returns had to be filed, two more newspapers were started in Bloomington, but the published report included only the *Iowa News* at Dubuque, the *Iowa Sun* at Davenport, the *Territorial Gazette* and the *Iowa Patriot* at Burlington. During the following century the printing and publishing industry has become one of the most important in the State.

Other forms of manufacture began a hundred years ago. Thirty-nine men were employed in brick and lime works; three tanneries were operated by four men; seven men working in four potteries produced earthenware worth over \$1050.

There were no breweries in Iowa, but two distilleries, one in Dubuque and the other in Scott County, made 4310 gallons of liquor. A Burlington furniture factory employed eleven men; and two gunsmiths in Burlington made forty small arms but no cannon. The census schedules for machinery, hardware, textiles, gunpowder, glassware, paper, cordage, musical instruments, and ships were blank in the tables of Iowa statistics.

The census takers of 1840 reported 365 persons in Iowa engaged in the "learned professions" or as "engineers". Some of the enumerators must have been more zealous than others in finding doctors and lawyers or more liberal in classifying persons as professional. Twenty-seven per cent of this group was located in Clayton County. Perhaps this number included some of the army personnel at Fort Snelling. But according to the printed summary no one was professionally employed in Delaware, Jackson, Jones, or Louisa counties.

Almost as many persons were employed in commerce as in the learned professions. Though the 355 were distributed about as might be expected, with Des Moines and Dubuque counties leading, Delaware, Jackson, Jones, and Louisa counties were again blank in this category, yet six "dry goods, grocery, and other stores" were listed in

Jackson County. There must have been some merchants or traders in the other areas. The detailed summary was even more misleading, inasmuch as the total number employed in commercial pursuits was stated to be twenty-nine.

Transportation by water was apparently not included under the heading of commerce, for 78 persons were listed as being engaged in the "navigation of canals, lakes, and rivers". Fifty-four of these were in Clayton County and seventeen in Lee County. Thirteen more gave their occupation as "navigation of the ocean".

According to the population summary of employment, practically all the mining was done in Clayton and Dubuque counties. The lone miner in Washington County must have been prospecting or retired. In the industrial section of the census, however, no mining statistics at all were included for Clayton County. How the twenty-eight miners were omitted is a mystery. And instead of 188 miners in Dubuque County only thirty were accounted for, and they produced a half million pounds of lead. Two men in Scott County "raised" 10,000 "bushels" of coal!

The census of 1840 showed that Iowa had made only a meager beginning in education. Sixty-three primary and common schools were counted, and one academy and grammar school.

There were no colleges or universities. The number of students in these schools was not great — 1500 in the common schools and twenty-five in the academy — yet there were 15,006 persons between the ages of five and twenty living in the Territory. No “scholars” were receiving their education “at public charge”. White persons over twenty who could not read or write were listed as 1118, or 5.7 per cent of the adult population. In recent years Iowa has boasted of having the lowest percentage of illiteracy in the nation — less than one per cent.

The enumeration of 1840, under the supervision of the Department of State, was characterized by several innovations which marked a new era in the history of the federal census. It was the first attempt to gather educational and health statistics, and in general the sixth census contained information that served as the basis for a better knowledge of some characteristics of the American people. While the wider scope of the census of 1840 was laudable, the execution was faulty. Errors were so numerous and falsifying that many organizations sent protests to Congress against its publication. The American Statistical Association declared that its members “conceive that such documents ought not to have the sanction of Congress, nor ought they to be regarded as containing true

statements relative to the condition of the people They believe it would have been far better to have had no census at all, than such an one as has been published".

Several statements appear relative to Iowa which must be erroneous. For instance, under the heading of population no colored persons were listed in Jefferson County, while under the heading of deaf and dumb at private charge, two colored persons were enumerated. Again, in Jones County, no colored persons were indicated under population but three were listed as deaf and dumb; in Linn County one colored person was listed in the general summary, but two blind colored persons were found. The total number of defectives in Iowa appears to have been fourteen deaf and dumb, six blind, and eleven insane or idiotic.

Only two persons were listed as receiving pensions for "revolutionary or military" services in the general population statistics, but in a separate volume six pensioners were named. George Perkins, aged eighty-nine, lived in Lee County; John Lepper, aged seventy-nine, lived with George Parker in Clinton County; Charles Shepherd, aged eighty-two, was a resident of Henry County; Daniel Baine, aged seventy-one, and John McDonald, aged eighty-six, made their homes in Des Moines County; and Sarah Hensling, aged

eighty-two, lived at the home of John Dawson in Dubuque County.

Considering the scope of the count, the inexperience of the enumerators, and the limited facilities for tabulation, the Iowa census of 1840 contained much valuable information and provided an interesting background against which to study the development of the Commonwealth during the last one hundred years.

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