

## Beginnings of Salem

In the decade of the seventies a local historian wrote: "The village of Salem is pleasantly located in the southwest corner of Henry County. In the center of the town is a beautiful public square, containing a number of shade-trees, around which is built the principal business portion of the town. Its inhabitants are industrious, thrifty and highly moral, and the educational and religious institutions receive much attention, and are well sustained. It is known throughout the State as an educational center, and Whittier College which is located there, has a reputation second to no institution of learning in Iowa. The mercantile and other business interests are in a prosperous condition." Such, in brief, is a portrayal of the little Quaker town in Henry County four decades after its founding.

It was in the fall of 1835 that Aaron Street, Jr., crossed the Mississippi for the purpose of selecting an eligible spot that would combine the requisites of health and excellence of soil, where he "might be instrumental in making a 'settlement' of Friends". Prospecting with a companion along the Skunk River in Henry County, Street was im-



pressed with the beauty of the landscape — the woods “abounding with fruits and wild honey” and the prairie bright with autumn flowers. “Hither will I come,” he said, “with my flocks and my herds, with my children and my children’s children, and our city shall be called Salem, for thus was the city of our fathers, even near unto the seacoast.”

It might be supposed that the name of the place had a Biblical connotation. According to scholars, Jerusalem, in Palestine, was originally called Salem. But when it fell into the hands of the Jebusites they called it Jebus; then the two words were united into one, Jerusalem, meaning the “habitation of peace”. Salem, therefore, signified peace. But the little frontier settlement in Iowa was named for another reason.

The original Aaron Street was a resident of Salem, New Jersey. He migrated to Salem, Ohio. From that point father and son moved westward to help build Salem, Indiana, and from there Aaron Street, Jr., came to start a new community in Iowa. Under these circumstances no other name for the settlement would have been so appropriate as Salem.

Together with Isaac Pidgeon, who had already built a cabin in the vicinity, and Peter Boyer, who had recently arrived, Aaron Street proposed to es-



tablish a Quaker community. Presently they were joined by a few relatives and friends. On land claimed by Street and Boyer a townsite was laid out. Not being equipped with surveying instruments, "they used a long grapevine for a measuring rod, it is said, cutting notches in it for the desired widths of the streets and alleys." The streets were laid off at right angles to each other, and in the center of the town a space of about two acres was left for a public square.

The new village of Salem with its congenial inhabitants and fertile environs was not long in attracting other settlers. In the fall of 1836 a number of Friends came on horseback from Randolph County, Indiana. Upon hearing of the founding of Salem they visited the locality, were much pleased with it, and recrossed the prairies of Illinois, carrying good news to those who anxiously awaited their return.

As soon as the springy prairie sod would bear the weight of their heavy wagons, on May 10, 1837, a caravan of nine families moved out from the neighborhood of Williamsburg, in the northern part of Wayne County, Indiana, bound for the Black Hawk Purchase. Among them were Reuben, Henry, and Abram P. Joy, Gideon, Stephen, Thomas, and Lydia Frazier, Thomas Cook, and Levi Commack. An account of this migration



written by the unsteady hand of one of the pioneers, reveals the fact that they had "considerable of stock" to drive, that it was "a long and tedious journey", and that they "landed in the neighborhood of Salem the 17th of 6th" month, 1837. By fall the little Quaker community was augmented by the Beards, Canadas, Commons, Emerys, Hammers, Hiatts, Hinshaws, Hocketts, Hoskinses, Jessops, Johnsons, Lewellings, Mendenhalls, Osborns, Stantons, Teases, Thomases, and Wilsons.

A year after this migration to Salem, Iowa became a separate Territory. Population was increasing rapidly, and towns were springing up at many points. Accordingly, there was a growing need for municipal regulation of sanitation, traffic, water supply, fire protection, street construction, public morals, and the maintenance of order. It was customary at that time for the Territorial legislature to provide a form of government and prescribe the powers of the officials for each town. This method afforded an opportunity to adapt municipal government to the peculiar needs or wishes of the local community. Such legislation had been adopted for Fort Madison and Burlington in 1838 and for Davenport and Muscatine in 1839. Accordingly, it is not strange that soon after Salem was settled its founders applied for a special char-



ter creating a town government for the regulation of local affairs.

The first suggestion of the incorporation of this new settlement appears in the *Journal* of the House of Representatives where, on December 24, 1839, William G. Coop, one of the Representatives of Henry and Jefferson counties, gave notice that "on to-morrow or some subsequent day" he would ask leave to introduce a bill "to incorporate the town of Salem, in the county of Henry". On December 28th, the bill was introduced in the House and read for the first time. A second reading occurred five days later, whereupon the House "resolved itself into a committee of the whole" to consider the bill. After amendments were suggested, the bill was recommended for passage. Without further difficulty the bill was adopted by both houses of the Legislative Assembly, and on January 14, 1840, the law was approved by Governor Robert Lucas.

After describing the boundaries of the town, the charter provided that it would be lawful "for the inhabitants" of Salem, "having the qualifications of electors," to meet at some convenient place on the first Monday of April, 1840, and annually thereafter, and "then and there proceed by plurality of votes to elect by ballot a president, recorder and three trustees". These men, it was



stipulated, should hold their offices for one year, and until their successors were elected and qualified.

In four Iowa municipalities already operating under special charters, suffrage was restricted to "free male inhabitants" having the "qualifications of electors", "free male citizens" who were "citizens of the United States", or "free white citizens over twenty-one years of age" who had resided in the community for a designated time. But in the Salem charter neither age, race, sex, nor term of residence was mentioned specifically. Suffrage was restricted only to inhabitants of the town "having the qualifications of electors". According to Territorial law, however, only free white male citizens of the United States who had resided in Iowa for six months were eligible to vote. Suffrage in Salem was therefore actually the same as in other towns.

The officers designated in the Salem charter were "a president, recorder and three trustees". This was similar to the provisions of the Fort Madison charter, where provision was made for the election of a president, recorder, and "five" trustees. It differed, however, from the Burlington charter which provided for a mayor and aldermen. A clause common to both types of town government also appeared in the Salem charter: any



three of the elective officers should constitute a board for the transaction of business.

It was the duty of the president to preside at all meetings of the town council, and the duty of the recorder to attend all meetings and keep a fair and accurate record of their proceedings. The president, recorder, and trustees were to constitute "a body corporate and politic, with perpetual succession, to be known and distinguished by the name of the president and trustees of the town of Salem". Moreover, they should have authority in law to acquire and hold property for the use of the town. They should have a common seal, which they might "alter at pleasure". They might sue or be sued, defend or be defended in court, and have such other duties and responsibilities as were then commonly given to corporate bodies.

The president and trustees were given power "to ordain and establish by-laws" and rules and regulations for the government of the town. They were also authorized to provide for the election of a treasurer, two assessors, a town marshal, and other subordinate officers who might be necessary "for the good government and well being of the town". Moreover, the president and trustees could authorize such fines and penalties as they might "deem proper" for the punishment of violations of local laws and ordinances. The charter



also enabled the president and trustees to grant all licenses for the retailing of "ardent spirits" within the limits of the corporation. The proceeds of such licenses were to be used for the "benefit of the town".

The law provided that the electors of the town, "in legal meeting assembled", should have power "by vote to direct the levy of taxes" of not to exceed one-half per cent on all real and personal estate within the limits of the corporation. The people might also vote to regulate and improve the lanes and alleys, and determine the width of sidewalks. But private property could not be taken for public use until the owner had been paid therefor, the value to be ascertained "by twelve disinterested free holders to be summoned by the marshal for that purpose."

For the purpose of enabling the president and trustees to carry into effect the provisions of this act, they were authorized to "lay a tax" annually on all real and personal property within the corporation. Such tax should not, however, exceed the sum voted by the people.

Aware of changing conditions on the frontier and the resulting need of flexible rules and regulations, the lawmakers stipulated that the charter might "be altered, amended, or repealed, by any future legislature of this territory or state."



It would be interesting to trace the actual political beginnings of Salem in detail. Where were the votes cast in the first election, who were the first officers, what ordinances were adopted, what taxes levied, what public improvements made? But alas, much of this information does not appear to have been preserved, records have been lost, and the memory of the oldest resident does not extend back to those early years. Possibly the charter was not put into effect. The names and activities of the pioneer presidents, recorders, and trustees of Salem can not be ascertained. Neither is it known what progress was made in the regulation of municipal affairs during those first years. But the town grew and prospered.

In February, 1840, the Burlington *Hawk-Eye & Patriot* referred to Salem as being "inhabited mostly by members of the Society of Friends" and as "a neat and thriving village". In April, the county commissioners of Henry County directed that township 70 north, range 7 west, and the west half of township 70 north, range 6 west should constitute a voting area "to be called Salem precinct", and that the election therein should be held at the town of Salem. In July of the same year, Paton Wilson, Peter Boyer, and Job C. Sweet were appointed judges of the election for Salem precinct.



In these records no reference is made to the village or town government as such. But John B. Newhall, writing in 1841 said: "Salem is an incorporated town, and contains several stores, one hotel, a postoffice, lyceum, primary school, and a large Friend's meeting house . . . a blacksmith, one wheelwright, one saddler, several carpenters, and numerous other mechanical branches, two physicians, and no lawyer."

Further evidence that the original charter was operative is found in the fact that in 1843 the act was amended. This amendment created a road district and changed the date of the town election to the second Monday in April. Moreover, it stipulated that the election should be conducted under the rules set forth in the original charter.

There is a legend, however, that the conduct of early municipal affairs in the little Quaker village was not entirely harmonious. Walter T. Shriner, who was born at Salem in 1849, and has spent the greater part of his ninety-one years in that community, tells interesting stories of those early days. He relates that D. W. Henderson operated a hotel at Salem and, although the town trustees saw the need of sidewalks, Mr. Henderson could not be induced to build adequate walks along his property.

A controversy ensued. Among other things



Henderson contended that the charter under which the town purported to operate was of no effect, and that the town trustees were without authority to act. Mr. Shriner further relates that eventually the trustees were convinced of the inadequacy of the charter. Meanwhile, two of the trustees had been authorized to take the town records to Mount Pleasant for a court hearing. In going overland with horse and cart they either accidentally or advertently lost the records in the Skunk River.

Whether this story is well founded, or only apocryphal, is not definitely known. At all events from the date of its establishment in the decade of the thirties to the time of the Civil War, Salem was known as a staunch Quaker settlement, a station on the underground railroad, and an educational center. Likewise in civic affairs there is evidence of pulsating influences. Under the original special charter a president, recorder, and trustees appear to have administered municipal affairs with varied degrees of success and failure until 1855. In that year a new charter was issued which provided for a mayor and council. Eventually Salem, like most Iowa municipalities, surrendered its special charter and has been governed for many years according to the general charter law.

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