

## Asa Turner and the Welsh

The father of Congregationalism in southeastern Iowa was Asa Turner. Like Aratus Kent he came from New England. Born at Templeton, Massachusetts, in 1799, he went to school at Amherst Academy, chose the ministry for his life work, got the baccalaureate degree from Yale, and graduated from the Yale Divinity School in 1830. At that time Yale was to a large extent under the influence of French scepticism and English deism, but a group of students thought their way through to a position of liberal Christianity which made the teaching of Jesus central in a system which by no means dispensed with a clear metaphysic.

Asa Turner was filled with missionary zeal. He helped form the Illinois Association of young preachers who came west to organize churches and colleges. They founded Illinois College at Jacksonville. When Turner arrived at Quincy, Illinois, in September, 1830, that frontier village had neither a church nor a school. By December he had gathered sufficient support to establish a Presbyterian church. He also preached in other communities and made trips back East for money to aid in building churches.



In 1834 Turner visited Iowa for the purpose of holding revival meetings and, if possible, forming churches. His interest in Iowa steadily increased. On one of his trips to the East he induced several New England families to migrate. They settled out on the prairie seven miles north of Fort Madison in 1836. At about the same time William P. Apthorp was sent to Fort Madison by the American Home Missionary Society. He often preached in the transplanted New England neighborhood which was called Denmark.

By the spring of 1838 these people were ready to organize a church and so they sent for Asa Turner. He came on the first of May. Within a distance of six or seven miles he "found about 30 sheep without a shepherd." These were gathered into a church. They told their "Christian experience, the ground of their hope, and their motives" in forming a church. "The examination was regarded as satisfactory." On May 5, 1838, they "assented to the Articles of Faith," and so the first Congregational church in southern Iowa was established. Asa Turner remained as pastor of the Denmark church for thirty years.

In 1839 Turner was appointed by the American Home Missionary Society as the first missionary agent for Iowa. In this capacity he explored those parts of the Territory not yet settled and, by let-



ters and visits, urged many New Englanders to settle in Iowa.

During his entire life, Asa Turner furthered education. As early as 1837 he began to talk about establishing a college at Denmark. An association was formed and on February 3, 1843, Denmark Academy was granted a charter by the Territorial legislature. Five years later Turner helped establish Iowa College which, in 1859, was moved from Davenport to Grinnell and ultimately became Grinnell College.

A Presbyterian church was organized at Burlington in 1838 by the Reverend James A. Clark of Connecticut. Clark was a graduate of Yale and Princeton and had the training necessary to meet the atheism and radicalism of the frontier. In 1840 he and Turner directed their attention to Abner Kneeland, who had come to Iowa in 1839 with the latest brand of infidelity which he forthwith proclaimed with great zeal. Kneeland, who had been a Universalist minister, passed from radicalism to radicalism until he left the church and wrote against it. Convicted in Boston of blasphemy, he served a jail sentence and then came with the First Society of Free Enquirers to a place which he named Salubria, near Farmington on the Des Moines River. He participated actively in politics, but his so-called "infidel ticket" was successfully



opposed by the Congregationalists. His colony, like so many of its kind, failed, but from it Kneeland preached until his death in 1844.

In 1843 the Burlington church, under the influence of its neighbors, became Congregational. This year was made memorable by the coming of Horace Hutchinson, one of the famous Iowa Band from Andover. Hutchinson died in the spring of 1846 and William Salter, another member of the Band, came to take his place. In this capacity he worked for sixty-four memorable years. He cooperated during this time with the Salem Quakers in the underground railroad; he worked for the cause of abolition by pen and lecture; he wrote books in the fields of religion, history, and *belles lettres*. Altogether William Salter had a tremendous influence on the cultural life of the State.

Meanwhile the Congregationalists from Dubuque in the north and from Burlington in the south met at Davenport. This town had been founded by Antoine Le Claire, whose French father and Indian mother symbolized the civilization of the earlier frontier. It was to Le Claire that Asa Turner went in 1848 for help in founding a college. Le Claire gave him a site for the building.

The First Congregational Church in Davenport was organized on July 30, 1839, by the Reverend Albert Hale, who was sent by the American Home



Missionary Society. The church had difficult days. A large element in the population inclined toward "free thinking". They might have been happy in Salubria. Against such doctrine the Reverend A. B. Hitchcock made some progress. He was a Yale graduate and, trained in the tradition of Timothy Dwight, had a philosophy of religion that could stand up against the "free thinkers". Here Dwight's *Theology Defined and Defended* found justification for its title. Ephraim Adams, one of the Iowa Band, came to the church in 1844 and remained eleven years. He was followed by G. F. Magoun who later served for many years as president of Iowa College.

The next important center of Congregationalism in Iowa was Iowa City. As the capital of the Territory, this town sprang up by the magic of political destiny. The capital commissioners, wishing to encourage the development of an ideal city, set aside certain plots for the various religious groups. Any denomination could claim half of a block, provided it put up a church building by July 1, 1843. But the Congregationalists were not strong enough to obtain a grant.

About five miles southwest of Iowa City, a Welsh settlement was established along Old Man's Creek. Most of the early church records of this community seem to have been lost. The



following account was supplied chiefly by T. D. ("Uncle Tom") Davis, shortly before his death in February, 1935. "Uncle Tom" Davis was one of the early pioneers in this region, having come to Iowa at the age of two and one-half years, in 1842. Edward T. Williams, Oliver Thomas, Henry Clement, Thomas Jones, Richard Tudor, David H. Jones, and David T. Davis were others of the early settlers. The Welsh took to the rolling country southwest of Iowa City, not only because they and their forebears had been used to it in the old country, but because of the fine oak timber that was available there for use in building their log houses.

"Meetings" were held from house to house before a church society was organized by the Reverend David Knowles, a missionary preacher, in 1846. The first church was built about 1856, when Morris Jones was minister. Hugh Tudor, known to the pioneers as a "good neighbor", donated an acre of land for the church and churchyard. The old church building has long since been moved to the David Hughes farm, where it is now used as a farm building.

The seats in the first church were simple oak slabs, out of Seehorn's sawmill, which was located just up the creek from the Elmer Williams farm, where part of the old dam may still be seen. These



benches were placed in two rows, with the aisle running down the middle between them, to accommodate the men on one side and the women and children on the other. Those were the days, so "Uncle Tom" Davis said, when they "got at the roots of Christianity". They knelt to pray, and when the minister spoke, he walked back and forth continually on the platform, so great was his fervor. There was no instrument of music for some time, even after the second church was built, but a church filled with Welshmen singing the old native hymns hardly needed such aid.

Families came to church with ox teams and wagons twice on Sundays, although the Thursday evening "preparatory meeting", which they had known back in Pennsylvania, was abandoned because of farm duties. Before a regular minister was located at Old Man's Creek, prayer meeting was held at ten o'clock on Sunday mornings, and Sunday school in the afternoon. After the minister came, preaching was held at ten in the morning and again in the evening, with Sunday school still in the afternoon. Mr. Davis recalled how they used to have to hurry home with the ox team to do chores in order to get back for evening preaching on time. Yet the church was always full, especially in the sixties, when settlers were becoming numerous in that region.



The first church was used until 1878. By that time the community had prospered, and the people felt that they should build a better meeting place. The Reverend C. D. Jones was minister at that time.

The church at Old Man's Creek shared the *Cymanfa* festival of the early days with the Long Creek, Flint Creek, and Williamsburg churches. The word itself is of Welsh derivation. It was the great festival of the year. Sometime during the beautiful prairie Indian summer, when the moon was beginning to get full, each of the four Welsh settlements was host to the other three for two or three days, the large group migrating to each of the four churches during a two weeks' period of religious inspiration and neighborly good fellowship. A few, of course, remained behind at each settlement to care for the stock, but everybody else got into their wagons and moved on to enjoy the mass hospitality at the next church.

The time was passed in preaching and singing. Services were held at ten and at two, and again in the evening. Presbyterians and Methodists frequently joined the Welshmen at these *Cymanfas*. Ministers of renown were often called in to preach the sermons, and "Uncle Tom" recalled somewhat wistfully those tremendous moonlight gatherings, the hearty though sometimes plaintive singing of



the Welsh, and the powerful preaching that again sounded the strength of Timothy Dwight in such men as Davis Waterville and R. G. Jones.

The Williamsburg community was also originally Welsh. The first settlers came to this village in 1844, buying land from the government for \$1.25 per acre. Not until 1856 was a congregation definitely formed. In that year the Reverend Jonathan Thomas, a circuit rider, came to the new settlement. His congregation of thirteen members met in the various homes to hold services.

Two years later, in 1858, the Reverend Evan J. Evans from Racine, Wisconsin, became the first resident pastor of the Williamsburg church. The new minister at once began to urge the people to build a church. The families, though few in number, "had a will to work". They hauled material from Muscatine and Iowa City. The church building cost \$1000, which to the pioneers was an exceedingly large sum. The pastor had taken land and supported himself by farming. In order that he might have a church, he mortgaged his farm and put the money into the common cause. Richard Williams, for whom the village was named, donated the site upon which the church was built. Owen M. Edwards, a contractor from Welsh Prairie ten miles east of Williamsburg, built the church.



The Williamsburg Congregational Church grew rapidly, becoming the social and cultural center of the new community. By 1871 the building was found to be too small, and an addition costing \$800 was added. The original building was put up with care and still stands, being used now as a dwelling house. The second church was built in 1890, and the present brick church was erected in 1916.

From the beginning until 1897, the entire service at the Williamsburg church was conducted in the Welsh language. The first pastor able to preach in both Welsh and English was the Reverend Abram Jones. In 1897 the younger generation began to desire an English service. They had become "too American" to appreciate any other language, and so an English service for the young people was held on Sunday evenings. From 1897 until 1911 the services continued to be carried on both in Welsh and in English. Since 1911 English only has been used. Few of the people can now speak the mother language.

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