

# The **P**ALIMPSEST

OCTOBER 1937

## CONTENTS

The Career of a Pioneer 317

WALTER E. KALOUDEK

In the Lifetime of a Bur Oak 335

SHIRLEY ANN BRIGGS

Asa Whitney in Iowa 343

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

PUBLISHED MONTHLY AT IOWA CITY BY  
THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT IOWA CITY IOWA  
UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912



### THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

*Superintendent*

---

### THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

---

PRICE—10c per copy: \$1 per year: free to members of Society

ADDRESS—The State Historical Society      Iowa City Iowa



# THE PALIMPSEST

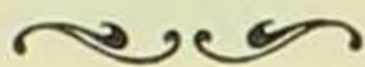
EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XVIII

ISSUED IN OCTOBER 1937

NO. 10

COPYRIGHT 1937 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA



## The Career of a Pioneer

*This story is based upon letters, diaries, journals, and various legal papers in the possession of Dr. H. R. Graham of Elberon, Iowa. — The Editor.*

Restlessness — the restlessness of the pioneer spirit — seized James R. Graham in the spring of 1852. Opportunity beckoned from the "golden" West, and her call could not be denied. Wealth, fame, adventure — everything that an ambitious, determined, and intelligent man could want — awaited the first claimant. The staid security of a small Eastern farm held little attraction for a man with such visions.

Born in Kortright, Delaware County, New York, on May 31, 1812, James Graham was raised on his father's farm. He was fortunate in securing a good education for the times, and his father's means enabled him to adopt stylish tastes rather out of the ordinary in a country lad.

In 1837 he was united in marriage with eighteen-year-old Margaret Pound, of Warwick, Or-



ange County, New York, and established a home in Delaware County. During the years following, to 1852, two sons and two daughters were born. The elder son died in infancy.

Meanwhile, the Grahams had moved to Davenport, in Delaware County, where they had purchased a farm. It was there that they decided to go West. The impending birth of another child, James H., delayed their departure until the fall of 1852. Then, at the age of forty, Graham cast his lot and that of his family into the tide of the westward migration. Every asset beyond personal effects was converted into cash, and the entire family took passage for Chicago. From there they went to Plainfreto, Illinois, where the country seemed attractive, and rented a small farm.

Winter passed. Spring revived the old feeling of discontent. Summer saw the family again moving westward. The goal was at last clear, and Graham was eager. Iowa was to fulfill his dreams.

At Davenport, Iowa, he purchased a young mare and colt, and a buggy for conveyance. Good horses, fast horses, were Graham's weakness. He was never long without one, and would race "anybody, anywhere, at any time". Despite his pioneering he was known as a "very toney old boy". His tall figure was arrayed in fine "store" clothes. His face was smooth-shaven, except for long dark



sideburns worn in the approved Eastern style. His thin hair was carefully parted. Steady, clear eyes, a firm mouth, and a determined chin characterized the man himself.

The family tarried a while in Iowa City while Graham "looked for land". Chance led him into acquaintance with a surveyor who had recently worked in Tama County. Of the land he had measured, the surveyor declared that he "liked the northeast quarter of section 25, township 83 north, range 13, best." Graham made immediate arrangements at the Iowa City office of the Register of the Land Office to buy that quarter section, together with the available northeast quarter of the northeast quarter of section 26 (40 acres) and the southwest quarter of the southwest quarter of section 35 (40 acres). The standard governmental price of \$1.25 an acre was paid. Then, with 240 acres of rich Iowa land awaiting, the Grahams, accompanied by a brother, Thomas A., began the last portion of the journey to their new home.

Iowa City was left behind sometime in September, 1853. At Cedar Rapids, Graham acquired another horse, four oxen, and "necessary articles". Included in this latter item were such items as seed, a "John Deere" plow, a cradle and sickles, other small tools and implements, and winter supplies. Two families, those of James Shugart and



Z. T. Shugart, with their wagons and oxen, joined the party. With them was Levi March, out "to look at land" with a view to later settlement.

The halt at Cedar Rapids was much longer than had been expected because of an untimely accident. Sometime during the night the mare and colt purchased at Davenport broke loose and started for home. Graham had to pursue them on horseback, and succeeded in recapturing the recalcitrant animals about halfway between Iowa City and Davenport. Thus it was not until almost the first of October that the little party actually struck out along the "Transcontinental Road".

On October 3rd the emigrants encountered a woman, eastward bound. Ragged and barefoot, she rode a heaped-up wagon pulled by a milch cow and an ox. Greetings were exchanged and queries made. "This country ain't no good", she said, "and I'm gittin' out. It got my husband but it won't git me." Before she resumed her exodus, however, she signed with her mark a quit-claim deed to the homestead of Stephen and Phoebe Fowler, being the "South West quarter of Section 24 and North West quarter of Section 35 Likewise one Log Cabin & about 1000 fence Rails the above Claim is Situated in Township 83". Graham got this place "for the Sum of Thirty five Dollor to me in hand paid."



His first task was to remove the cabin so recently acquired to his "homestead" on the adjoining quarter section he had bought at Iowa City. Much of the surrounding territory was prairie, but timber was not entirely lacking. Wooded Salt Creek and its many small tributaries were close by. Preparations for the winter were immediately begun. The cabin was repaired and rendered more habitable, and a small addition was built. A stock shed was constructed. Supplies were stored. Game, which abounded in the vicinity, found its way into the family larder. Sweet-smelling hay, made from the long wild grass that grew by the acre, was stacked for the stock. Finally, the sod was broken. Everyone helped. Life was rough and rude; loneliness and hardship were the common lot of all. But the future was rosy with promise.

Winter came all too quickly, though it did not put an end to the activity on the new homestead. Repairs had to be made and implements put in order. The opening of spring found the Grahams ready and eager to start the fight for existence against all the trials of a new land.

Road building was the leading topic of discussion and action in Tama County during the years 1853 and 1854. The settlers were determined to have the county open to travel and free communi-



cation. Three main roads were established in 1854. One of these, known locally as the "Ridge Road", was destined to have considerable influence upon Graham's future. It furnished, in effect, a further continuation of the old "Transcontinental Road", connecting Cedar Rapids and Marshalltown, and points west. Originally traced by the "bull-whackers" with their ox-drawn freight wagons along the line of least resistance, this highway has recently been included in the Lincoln Highway. The road ran along the southern boundary of Graham's homestead. Crossing it, and running north and south along Graham's eastern boundary, stretched the Tama-Benton county line.

Travel over the new road was increasingly brisk. With his usual foresight, Graham early saw the possibilities of his position, and proceeded to extract every possible advantage from it. He immediately started the construction of a tavern, using lumber that was rough-hewn from trees felled in the vicinity or purchased from neighbors. Finishing lumber was purchased at Iowa City, largely from Cotes Davis and Company, and laboriously hauled in ox-drawn wagons on week-long trips. The tavern, a three-story building, neared completion by early fall.

Meanwhile, Graham joined forces with his



southern neighbor, Simon Overturf, in a greater venture. After due deliberation a portion of the land of each, extending for one block on either side of the Ridge Road and two blocks westward from the county line, was platted into a village site. Thus was Redman founded. That portion of the Ridge Road which cut through the middle of the town became Main Street, crossed at its center by Gama Street; that portion of the county line that formed the eastern boundary became Greenwich Street; to the north lay Jefferson; to the west was Buckeye; and to the south, Washington.

Already competition threatened one and one-half miles to the south. Levi Marsh, a friend and immigrant companion of the previous year, had returned and begun platting his own town of West Irving, since known as Irving. As yet Redman existed only on paper — and that not recorded. Nevertheless, Graham turned his seemingly inexhaustible energies toward breathing life into it. His reward came in securing for Redman the establishment of the second post office in the county. His commission as postmaster, dated September 28, 1854, arrived in October, bearing a personal message of friendship and proffered service from Senator A. C. Dodge. A mail route from Maringo to Marietta, in Marshall County, had been established early in the year: Redman was to be



served by a branch route from Kozta, in Iowa County, through Redman, to Toledo, the county seat of Tama County.

A general store, if it might be dignified by that name, was included in the plans for the tavern. Graham's business sense caused him to lay in a small stock of merchandise. Trade was meagre, however, for a larger and more adequate stock was available at the Marsh store at West Irving. Furthermore, the larger "cities" farther east — Cedar Rapids, Iowa City, and sometimes Davenport — profited from the lion's share of trade from inland neighborhoods. Practically all transactions were by barter, for "hard" money was scarce and paper money depreciated so rapidly that it was a poor medium of exchange. Graham took a great variety of farm products in trade for his goods — grain, lumber, skins, hides, and livestock. He undertook on his own responsibility the resale of this miscellaneous produce in the "city". These transactions were profitable — returns of a hundred to two hundred fifty per cent being not uncommon.

In the spring of 1855 a stage line was established between Marengo and Waterloo, over the county-line road. Redman became a regular stop. Immigrants passed in ever-increasing numbers over the two roads, as the county "filled up".



Many were compelled to "wait-over" at the tavern, when spring thaws and rains caused a nearby tributary of Salt Creek to overflow. Indeed, so frequently did this occur that the stream was christened and still remains "Troublesome Creek".

Business flourished. Graham had to reserve accommodations for wagons near his tavern. A much-needed "wagon-shop", or blacksmithy, was set up on one of the adjoining town lots. Four other lots in the still unrecorded village were sold to neighbors and friends interested in the venture. Increasingly, Graham found himself seduced from farming, and therefore relied upon the work of his family and hired help for his tillage enterprises.

It has been said that the Iowa of the fifties lived in the future; that it was a land of poverty and small things, but withal a land of dreams. Land was the keyword in Iowa's development. In January, 1855, Graham received a power of attorney from Grover S. Breese, of Aurora County, Illinois, to dispose of certain holdings in Tama County. His negotiations were so successful that by mid-year he began seriously contemplating the inclusion of real estate business with his other affairs. The office was needed, for no local agent was located nearer than Toledo, the county seat. To this end Graham became the agent of Green and Stone, of Muscatine, who listed Tama County



lands at \$3.25 per acre. Later, he also represented another firm, Culbertson and Reno, of Iowa City.

However, certain affairs required more immediate attention. Several families were scattered throughout the neighborhood. Educational facilities were sadly lacking. A petition to the School Fund Commissioner of Benton County was drawn up, requesting the formation of a school district. Graham's name headed the list of twenty signatures, and the petition was granted on August 25th. Under his supervision work was begun immediately on the erection of a schoolhouse close to Redman. On November 17th the plat of the village was finally recorded.

The winter of 1855-56 was long and hard, but not uneventful. Unusually heavy snow stopped travel and business. Animal life and small game suffered. Deer, half-starved, were easily killed by man and wolves. Venison was cheap, "cheaper than gun-powder". While hauling in a fresh kill one evening, Graham found himself flanked by wolves, attracted by the smell of fresh meat. A race for safety ensued. The wolves, not particularly numerous or formidable, were nevertheless potentially dangerous. But Graham was determined to save the meat. Yelling at the top of his rather "big" voice, he urged his team to run. His wife, almost a half-mile away, heard the uproar



and hurried out with a lantern to meet her husband. The wolves, frightened by the light and the nearness of the buildings, reluctantly gave up the chase.

Work upon the new schoolhouse, suspended during the winter, was rushed to completion as soon as the weather permitted. Lumber and materials were purchased at Iowa City, Kozta, Muscatine, Grinnell, Toledo, and from local men. By early spring, with the aid of a community "raising", the building was finished and ready for use.

Graham's frequent absences and increased business necessitated the employment of an assistant, John Allen, at the post office. More supplies were brought from Iowa City, where new vigor had been imparted by the arrival of the railroad. Linseed oil, brushes, small implements, and lamp black were items included in the regular list. The tavern flourished. Prices were "good": Graham bought corn at 25 cents, hogs at  $5\frac{1}{2}$  cents, beef at 4 cents, and home-milled flour at  $3\frac{1}{4}$  cents per pound.

The harvest was small, in comparison with modern crops secured from the same land. In 1856, however, it was considered satisfactory. Graham recorded that his corn yielded "almost 40" bushels to the acre, his wheat "about 18", and his oats "about 30". A Wight reaper, imported



from Dayton, Ohio, was used to help harvest the crop that year.

Graham continued his association with the land companies of Muscatine and Iowa City, and also acted independently for several land owners "back East". Jesse Beeson, of Uniontown, Pennsylvania, was the first of his new clients. Graham himself purchased an additional eighty acres adjoining his holdings in Redman, for \$1000, from his old client, Grover S. Breese.

The year 1857 passed in marked contrast to its predecessor. Financial panic seized the nation. Business slumped everywhere and land sales stopped abruptly. Old settlers were debt-ridden, and new settlers were few. Even the winter of 1857-58 was severe, ending a "bad year" throughout. Heavy snows obstructed work until late in March. When they vanished, however, the new year showed more promise. The spring stock-up at the store was still composed mainly of staples but small quantities of leather and potash, and a number of chairs (on order) were also included, as well as "2 Rays Arithmetic No. 3." Most of the goods were traded out, for pork at 6 cents, lard at 10 cents, and oats at 25 cents. Hides, dry or green, were brought in regularly. One shipment alone, to W. P. Cook and Company, of Chicago, consisted of 41 dry and 21 green hides.



Redman gained a new and lost an old resident family. It is characteristic of Graham that he relieved those departing, the William Lamphier family, of their town lot.

Land again began to increase in value, and sales quickened. Several letters were received from Eastern landowners, anxious to sell their holdings in Tama County. Once more Graham turned his major attention to real estate deals. The following year brought a continued small but steady increase in the business, particularly with the Eastern clients. As agent it was his duty to look out for his clients' taxes, to attempt revaluation, and to keep the lands from being sold for arrears. Complaints of taxes were numerous. Jesse Beeson expressed the usual sentiment when he wrote: "I think the Taxes are very high for a New Country."

Although the land business showed a marked increase, it took second place during 1860. The railroad occupied everyone's attention that year. Graham was among the first to offer his services in helping to raise money for "preliminary surveys" of the Cedar Rapids and Missouri River Railroad. Subscriptions were liberal. It was a gala occasion when the road was finally completed to the newly platted town of Belle Plaine, six miles to the south — although that event was to mark the beginning of the end for Redman.



The railroad brought new markets to a county which was ready for them. New settlers followed. References to the railroad were made in every letter of land-seekers. Typical were the comments of C. N. Thompson: "Having once stopped over night with you I take the liberty . . . to make some inquiries in relation to a piece of land. . . . Please inform me in regard to whether the rail road prospects are at all good for a road to pass anywhere through that vicinity & whether land can be bought near there & at about what price as others will come if I do . . . if the rail road is located please let me know . . . where the nearest station will most probably be."

In June a tornado passed near Redman. Graham made unskilled observations of the phenomenon which he forwarded to the Smithsonian Institution at Washington, D. C. The information was warmly appreciated, according to a letter of thanks from W. L. Nicholson. Mr. Nicholson was careful, however, to state that while he was pleased to be of any service, his sphere of power "does not lay in the political line."

The excitement of the Civil War grew slowly in Tama County. Interest in the slavery question had not been high. War meetings were held throughout the county, to spur up enlistments, and the cry, "Save the Union", brought many volun-



teers. Redman community sent its share along with the rest.

Times were not too "easy" in the following two years. Collections were hard to make. Nevertheless, Graham continued to devote most of his time to the land business. On October 17, 1861, he bought an eighty-acre tract in Tama County for two dollars an acre, and on the following day he purchased 160 acres in Benton County for the delinquent taxes.

Early in the spring of 1863 a fire of unknown origin ravaged the struggling little town of Redman. Little beyond a few personal effects and Graham's "papers" was saved. The Grahams were received by the Marsh family at West Irving, where they were fed, clothed, and sheltered until new arrangements could be made. Graham later attempted to pay his business rival and personal friend for this act of kindness, but he could not prevail upon Marsh to accept a cent. Redman existed no longer. The post office was removed to West Irving. The few other shops and business concerns moved either to the same town or to the livelier and more enterprising Belle Plaine.

After studying the prospects, Graham decided to "follow the railroad". He, therefore, moved to the newly-formed town of Chelsea, in Tama County, where the C. R. & M. R. had just arrived.



There he began buying and selling grain, livestock, hides, and produce. Business was very good. Shipments, most of them handled by M. S. Nichols and Company, were made regularly to Chicago. The outlook was so promising that, on November 2nd, Graham purchased for forty dollars a town lot in the community. In the following year, on August 24th, he bought from Frederick Strobe a lot near the tracks, complete with a one-story frame warehouse and platform scales, for \$350.

In 1864 arrangements were made and work was begun on a project to rebuild a house on the old homestead. For the past year the Graham family had been forced once more to use the original log cabin. But by the fall of 1864 the new home, erected at a cost of about \$1500, was completed. Actual farm work still remained largely in the hands of hired help, but Graham displayed keen interest in "putting the farm in shape".

Business continued active during the years 1864 to 1867. On April 1, 1865, Graham joined in partnership with John Maholm in the business of "Buying and Vending all kinds of Grain". The firm, known as Graham and Company, operated in Belle Plaine during the two succeeding years. Graham maintained the Chelsea warehouse independent of the partnership and continued to buy



livestock, mostly hogs at \$4.50 a hundred, through this station.

The year 1869 saw Graham turning more and more to farming. On March 16th he commenced planting wheat, barley, oats, corn, and cane. The neighborhood was "filling up". In the vicinity of the former Redman were twenty families numbering fifty-five persons. Most of the available land was under cultivation, and the crops were good. Graham purchased an Aultman and Taylor thresher, imported from Mansfield, Ohio. With it he threshed 869 bushels of wheat and 169 bushels of oats on his first "set". Another purchase consisted of a "Williams' Combined Fanning Mill", distributed by Barr, Freeman, and Elsifer, of Vinton. So well did it work that Graham secured the agency for the mill.

Agricultural interests were dominant on the homestead. Nevertheless, a little land business occasionally interrupted the farm work. In 1866 Graham had disposed of some of his later acquisitions to Charles Hromatko and other clients, and in 1867 he had made a sale for an Eastern client. In 1869 he bought an adjoining fourteen acres from Lydia Wright, for \$20, and negotiations were begun with J. S. McVey, of Walhonding, Ohio, for a "big deal" that was never quite finished. Farming, however, continued Graham's



major interest following 1868. The family was well content.

The year 1871 dawned auspiciously. A proposed project for a north-and-south railroad from Waterloo to Belle Plaine was under way. Graham was active in arousing interest in the construction of this proposed branch, which was to be called the Waterloo, Belle Plaine, and North Missouri Railway, but the project failed.

Intermittent abdominal pains bothered Graham throughout the summer. They were diagnosed as "Inflammation of the Bowels", probably appendicitis. Gradually the pain and discomfort increased, culminating in a final attack to which he succumbed on August 17, 1871. After fifty-nine years, two months, and seventeen days of active life, the pioneer work of James R. Graham was ended.

WALTER E. KALOUPEK



## In the Lifetime of a Bur Oak

In the year 1762, which marked the close of the Seven Years War and the subsequent cession of Louisiana to Spain, the region that became the State of Iowa was a wilderness of prairie and forest untouched by plow or ax. Save for a few adventurers and fur traders who had made cursory excursions by way of the principal streams, only the native Indians had seen the land. Probably many years passed before a white man appeared at the future site of Iowa City where the wooded hills crowded close to both sides of the river. Casual hunters, both red and white, must have noticed the tall white oaks and spreading elms that crowned the bluffs. Hickory, walnut, and bur oaks covered the lower slopes. Some of the trees had lived for more than a century, and others were slim little saplings. Among these bur oaks there was one that had sprouted in 1762 and was to witness great changes in its surroundings for almost two hundred years.

By the time the colonial patriots signed the Declaration of Independence, the little bur oak beside the Iowa River was fourteen years old. It was already four inches in diameter. It stood



among others of its kind just over the crest of the ridge away from the river, in a shallow ravine which angled away to the southeast where it joined the little valley of a creek which turned to flow into the river farther south. The bluff, bounded on the west by the river and on the south and east by the creek, merged on the north with a semi-circle of hills which surrounded the creek valley like a vast amphitheater. From the position atop the hill where the young oak stood, the view up and down and across the river was unobstructed. There the Old Stone Capitol stands today.

Little occurred to alter the appearance of the countryside until 1837, when the first squatters arrived in the vicinity. Napoleon, a tiny settlement two miles south beside the river, served as headquarters for the settlers. While a few land claims were staked out in the neighborhood, fur trading was still the chief business. Indians were numerous. The site was still far west of the settled areas in May, 1839, when it was chosen for the capital of the Territory of Iowa.

The Capitol itself was to be located only a few rods southwest of the bur oak, by that time a sizable tree some ten inches thick. In its shade, on the Fourth of July, 1839, a celebration was held at the new seat of government in honor of the



sixty-third anniversary of American independence. About a hundred people joined in an open-air dinner and subsequent festivities.

Work was soon begun on the stone Capitol. The rhythmic thud of axes broke the silence of the forest. The air was filled with the acrid smoke of burning brush piles. Heavy explosions at the limestone quarries reverberated down the valley. The little ravine on the brink of which grew the bur oak was filled with the dirt excavated for the foundations of the Capitol. It was a hazardous place for a sturdy tree to be growing. Surveyors located Clinton Street perilously close to the grove of bur oaks. Solid logs were in demand for the many houses that were being raised. But with the thinning of the woods the bur oak prospered, its rings becoming twice as wide as before. By 1841 Iowa City had become a flourishing frontier town with 700 inhabitants.

During the years while the Old Stone Capitol served as the seat of the Territorial and State governments, until 1857, the tide of settlement passed far beyond this erstwhile outpost. Highways converged at the capital, the railroad came to Iowa City, and many brick and stone houses superseded the original log cabins. Just to the north across Jefferson Street ten-inch oak beams were used to support the floors of a fine stone mansion. The



wild animals had disappeared and with them went the Indians and the fur traders. The character of life that moved about the bur oaks had changed.

Meanwhile, Iowa City was enjoying the height of its importance. Politics filled the hotels with interested citizens and attracted business enterprises. Hundreds of immigrants westward bound disembarked at the railroad terminus in the capital city and continued their journey in stage-coaches. As the population shifted farther west, energetic speculators in rival towns started the agitation for the removal of the State capital to a place nearer the geographical center of the Commonwealth. The railroad was extended to Marengo and beyond. In 1857 the capital was moved to Des Moines. Only the presence of the State University lent distinction to the community otherwise destined to become an agricultural market place like hundreds of Iowa towns.

Nevertheless, the venerable bur oak standing in the afternoon shadow of the Old Stone Capitol, occupied a favorable position to witness important events in the new era. The quiet, primeval years of its youth had passed into oblivion; the sudden bustle and turmoil of political activities were fading in the memory of the pioneers; and on the eve of the centennial of the life of the towering tree the career of an institution dedicated to high-



est aims of civilization was dawning beside it. The Capitol grounds were transformed into the campus of the State University. South Hall was erected for the growing collegiate classes and another brick building containing the chapel and library occupied the corresponding position just north of the Capitol.

Climate and rainfall, however, were matters of greater importance to the bur oak tree. For forty days rain fell almost constantly in the summer of 1851. The deluge began in May and did not subside until July. There was no need for so much rain in Iowa. During the previous year the rainfall was estimated at forty-nine inches which, according to modern records, was about eighteen inches above normal. The ground must have been full of water in the spring of 1851. Trees and shrubs grew rapidly. High above danger from flood waters, the clump of bur oaks on the Capitol grounds must have flourished during two successive seasons of abundant moisture. Proof of such favorable conditions may be read in the unusual width of these annual growth rings. At the end of one hundred years the oak measured sixteen inches in diameter.

Perhaps the tree was also sensitive to the change from pure woodland air to the smoky atmosphere of the growing city. At first wood was



used almost exclusively for fuel. In the seventies many cords of hard wood were piled on the campus. Earnest students working their way through college sawed and chopped the logs into firewood and carried it to the classroom stoves. Soon thereafter, the native woodlands having been depleted, coal was substituted for oak and hickory — a change which may have been perceptible to the tree and doubtless retarded its growth.

Nor did pigs and cattle frequent the campus as had been their wont in the earlier years. Sometime in the sixties the University authorities purchased a dog to keep stock off, and later a fence was built for a similar purpose. In 1870 another improvement was made near the bur oak when Clinton Street, long notorious for the depth of its mud, was paved with macadam.

As the country became more thickly inhabited, the natural wild life of the forest changed. The otters, minks, and beavers had gone long ago. Even the coons, wolves, and foxes were too shy to be seen near town. Only the squirrels and the cottontails remained. The upper branches of the strong old oak no longer bowed with the weight of passenger pigeons. Robins sometimes nested in its boughs, but the gayer song birds lived in more secluded spots. No one knows when the first English sparrow arrived, perhaps within twenty



years after it was brought to this country in 1850.

For about three-quarters of a century the burr oak stood in full view of University building operations, particularly during the expansion into the three blocks just east of the main campus between Iowa Avenue and Jefferson Street. A medical building was erected south of the Old Stone Capitol in 1882 and several neighboring oaks had to be removed that Science Hall might be built west of the old bur oak in 1883. Separate buildings for the dental college and homeopathic medicine followed, and the University Hospital, now East Hall, replaced the Mechanics' Academy.

More exciting, from the tree's standpoint certainly, were the fires which burned the library in 1896 and the medical building and Old South Hall in 1901. But the ruins were soon removed and better buildings rose in their places. In 1898 a fine bur oak called "the pride of the campus" was cut down to make room for Liberal Arts Hall. The first of the modern stone buildings, it formed the southeast unit of the Pentacrest. Seven years later Old Science Hall was moved across Jefferson and Capitol streets to clear the space in the morning shadow of the bur oak for the new Natural Science Hall, now Macbride Hall. Pentacrest was completed with the Physics Building in 1912 and University Hall in 1924.



With the advent of these modern structures came the central heating system. Though the tall chimney carried the black soft-coal smoke high into the air, the southwest wind often blew it across the top of the old bur oak. More serious, however, was the big tunnel that conveyed the steam pipes to the buildings east of Clinton Street. It cut through the roots of the big tree only a few feet north of its base. The constant heat dried up the moisture and baked the earth in that direction. During the severe drought of 1934, however, its thirst was partially quenched by constant sprinkling of the campus lawn. On several occasions that season its leaves were choked with dust from the great plains unwisely cultivated by the sons and grandsons of pioneers who may have passed the old bur oak in Iowa City on their way west.

At last in 1936, the ancient bur oak died from a diseased condition in its upper branches. A cross-section of the trunk was presented to the University Department of Botany, that its rings might be counted and its age thus determined. The trunk measured thirty inches and the rings showed 175 years of life. One old bur oak still stands — the lone survivor of the clump that originally grew on the edge of the little ravine.

SHIRLEY ANN BRIGGS



## Asa Whitney in Iowa

Asa Whitney was no idle dreamer. Schooled in the commercial world, consulted by the shrewdest business men of his time, Whitney was a man of action as well as vision. He was born on a farm at North Groton, Connecticut, in 1797, but made his way to New York before he was twenty. Soon he was hard at work in a great commercial house. Between 1825 and 1836 he traveled extensively abroad, especially in France, where his resemblance to Napoleon Bonaparte caused frequent comment. Upon his return to New York he went into business for himself. He prospered in real estate and commerce until the panic of 1837 left him almost penniless.

Undaunted by his losses, Whitney set out for China in 1840 where he remained about fifteen months engaging in business for himself and acting as an agent for several New York firms. So profitable were his ventures in the Chinese trade that upon his return he never again worked for personal gain.

During his sojourn in China Whitney compiled statistical information to show that a transcontinental railroad across the United States would be



of great importance in stimulating commerce with the Orient. His vision and his enterprise were demonstrated soon after he returned to New York in 1844. It was not long before he presented his plan for a transcontinental railroad to Congress. Whitney favored the route from Lake Michigan to the Pacific via South Pass. This route, the resourceful Yankee contended, was far enough north to include much unoccupied but fertile land which could be sold to provide funds for railroad construction. Whitney's proposed transcontinental line cut straight across northern Iowa.

Having presented his plan to Congress, Whitney set out to survey his route and confirm his judgment. He chose Milwaukee as the starting point, purchased wagons and equipment to make the survey, and enlisted an enthusiastic party of young men in his venture.

Whitney left Milwaukee on June 19, 1845. He proceeded westward by way of Prairieville, Fox Lake, Fort Winnebago, and Mineral Point to Prairie du Chien. From Prairie du Chien he wrote a New York editor on June 30th: "There are many good routes for a road from the lake to the Mississippi; and a road may be built any where in a straight line without any serious obstructions or heavy expense, requiring no expensive embankments or excavations, and no difficult streams to



cross. The country is fast settling; and the railroad would settle it much faster than it could itself be built. I am *now* perfectly satisfied of the feasibility of my plan. . . . I shall leave here tomorrow or next day for the Missouri".

Whitney waited for some time at Prairie du Chien, hoping to secure a guide, but no one volunteered. The intrepid trail-blazer was nonplussed. "Without a guide and with but one laboring man", he wrote, "I felt a heavy responsibility, and no small reluctance in leading the young gentlemen with me into probable danger and severe hardships and fatigue; but they, to a man, said 'Go on, we will follow you, we cannot turn back.' " Crossing the Mississippi at Prairie du Chien, Whitney and his party of surveyors struck out boldly across northern Iowa. They crossed the Turkey River at Fort Atkinson.

As they journeyed due westward through present-day Winneshiek, Chickasaw, and Floyd counties, still without a guide, they crossed the different tributaries of the Turkey, Wapsipinicon, and Cedar rivers. A letter from one of the party dated ninety miles west of Prairie du Chien on July 14th complained of hot weather and slow progress. The thermometer, around what is now Charles City, stood at 98° in the shade and the party had traveled "only 10, 13, to 17 miles a day,



having sometimes to unload their wagons three times a day, to cross streams of water."

As far as Clear Lake their journey led them westward through the Neutral Ground. From Clear Lake, Whitney headed in a northwesterly direction, hoping to find the dividing ridge between the waters that ran north into the Minnesota River and those that emptied into the Des Moines. Apparently he traveled a short distance into what is now southern Minnesota but returned quickly to Iowa. The party crossed the Des Moines in the vicinity of Estherville after "felling trees for a bridge".

Westward they plodded until they reached the Spirit Lake region which Whitney described as "a number of small lakes, forming the head waters of the little Sioux, emptying into the Missouri". Soon they crossed the Floyd and the Big Sioux.

They had now entered present-day South Dakota, all the while following a due west course. A short time later Whitney recorded the "White Stone or Vermillion; then Jaques' river, and then the great, the grand Missouri, 15 miles below the great bend, making a distance from the Mississippi of more than 500 miles, *over the finest country upon the globe*, capable of sustaining more than three times the population of the same space in any other part of the world!"



Whitney was delighted with his success as an explorer. "Before leaving *Prairie du Chien*", he wrote, "I fixed upon a route through which I would like to pass to the Missouri and with compass in hand made it within five miles of the point started for."

He did not, however, minimize the difficulties. His youthful companions, he declared, had encountered "many hardships, much fatigue, hard labor, hunger, and thirst. I cannot say too much for them, nor can too much praise be awarded for their conduct. Unused to any labor, I feared it would be hard upon them, but they never flinched; were ready to wade through mud, water, and grass to their neck, with our provisions upon their heads; to swim rivers, to fell trees for bridges, and all other fatigues necessary for the accomplishment of our object."

But it was the rich lands of Iowa through which his transcontinental railroad was to pass that thrilled the enthusiastic Whitney. "No swamps, no marshes, no flooding of rivers, except in the vicinity of the *Wabisipinica*, and then but a small distance, and undoubtedly the most healthy country in the world. — I have never found the atmosphere so pure." The surface of the land was "gently rolling" with just enough undulating to let all the water run off.



With uncanny foresight Whitney prophesied the agricultural greatness of Iowa. "The soil of this vast country", he declared, "is as rich as it can be — none richer. In the whole distance, I did not see one half acre of useless, bad land; all covered with the best of grasses for cattle, and when cured, good hay. The farmer will want but the plough, the seed, the scythe, and the sickle."

During the next seven years Whitney carried on an amazing newspaper publicity campaign. With unflagging energy he spoke before public meetings and to legislatures in many States. Although he did not succeed personally in building a transcontinental railroad he lived to see the Union Pacific constructed and work on three other roads begun.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN



# THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Established by the Pioneers in 1857  
Located at Iowa City Iowa

---

## PUBLICATIONS OF THE SOCIETY

The Quarterly Journal of History  
The Palimpsest—A monthly magazine  
The Public Archives Series  
The Iowa Biographical Series  
The Iowa Economic History Series  
The Iowa Social History Series  
The Iowa Applied History Series  
The Iowa Chronicles of the World War  
The Miscellaneous Publications  
The Bulletins of Information

---

## MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the State Historical Society may be secured through election by the Board of Curators. The annual dues are \$3.00. Members may be enrolled as Life Members upon the payment of \$50.00.

*Address all Communications to*

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
Iowa City Iowa