

Comment by the Editor

THE GROWTH OF CITIES

An observant stranger traveling up the Mississippi River in the spring of 1833 could have predicted where the first settlements in the Iowa country would be located. Even then, before any claims had been established, the most eligible sites for future cities were apparent. The junction of the Des Moines and Mississippi rivers, the presence of rapids, the location of military posts, the existence of lead mines, and the prospect of agricultural markets indicated clearly the natural advantages of Keokuk, Davenport, Fort Madison, Dubuque, Muscatine, and Burlington.

All these river towns were founded during the first year or two of settlement in Iowa. At first the mineral resources gave Dubuque a big advantage. The political prestige of Burlington, however, soon balanced the lead of Dubuque. By 1840 Davenport was running third, Fort Madison fourth, Muscatine fifth, and Keokuk had scarcely started in the race for supremacy.

During the second decade Keokuk became the gate city for river commerce and changed places

with Fort Madison in relative size. Railroads came in the fifties to alter the destiny of rival towns. Then the lead mines failed; the lumber industry flourished for a while and withered; factories, foundries, and mills contributed to the growth of the river cities. After a century Davenport is first in population, Dubuque is second, Burlington third, Clinton fourth, Muscatine fifth, Keokuk sixth, and Fort Madison seventh. Between the first and last the difference is nearly 47,000 inhabitants.

Particular causes of growth and decadence are easy to find, but the subtle influences that determine the character of a town are hard to define. Nobody knows how many people select their residence for cultural advantages. Some folks are attracted by low taxes and others by paved streets, good schools, efficient police, beautiful parks, and many services provided by public expense. Why were most of the cities located on the west bank of the Mississippi? How have occupations, religion, commerce, and nationalities affected politics and morals in the river towns? Why did Clinton eclipse her elder sister Lyons? Has rapid growth made any city better?

Perhaps the fundamental rivalry of cities lies deeper than statistical platitudes.

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