

Plum Grove

On the edge of Iowa City, toward the southeast, stands a dignified two-story brick house, set on a spreading lawn dotted here and there with trees. There is a deep significance in any historic dwelling and this one, known as Plum Grove, spans a century of Iowa history and tells an interesting story of pioneer days. It was the country home of Robert Lucas, the first Governor of the Territory of Iowa, and its seven rooms, walnut trimmings, winding staircase, and sturdy, inviting fireplaces reveal the pattern of those early days. The house, like the first owner, has dignity, poise, stability, and modest grandeur.

Robert Lucas was born on April 1, 1781, among the independent planters of Virginia, the son of a Revolutionary soldier of wealth and distinction, and was educated by a private tutor. Later he moved with his parents to Ohio where his life was enriched by pioneer experiences. He was slender of stature, with pronounced physical features. Although not a large man, he was impressive and stately in appearance.

In 1810, Robert Lucas married Elizabeth Brown, who died in 1812, leaving one daughter

named Minerva. In 1816 he married Friendly Ashley Sumner, and moved to Piketon, Ohio, where he operated a general store. A few years later, on a farm nearby, he built a large two-story brick house, each room of which "upstairs and down was provided with a fireplace." Because of its pleasant surroundings, and in honor of his good wife, Mr. Lucas named the place Friendly Grove.

Lucas was twice Governor of the State of Ohio, but when his services as chief executive ended, he was quick to return to the quiet surroundings of Friendly Grove. It was not long, however, until his friends recommended him for the office of Governor of the new Territory of Iowa and in 1838 President Martin Van Buren appointed Mr. Lucas to that office.

With the spirit of the pioneer still in his blood, the veteran statesman gladly accepted the challenge of the new West, but Mrs. Lucas had little of the adventurous spirit which characterized her husband. "Aunt Friendly Lucas was a large woman. Not a great deal over five feet in height, she weighed perhaps two hundred pounds. She had a florid complexion and an everready tongue, an unquenchable fund of spirits and vigor, and a wonderful reputation as a cook". Friendly Grove was to her a paradise and she preferred to remain there. Like her husband, she was a resolute soul.

so it was that when Robert Lucas came to Iowa in the summer of 1838, he came alone.

In the spring of 1839, however, William Reed, a nephew of Robert Lucas, made a trip to Iowa by steamboat and with him came two of the Governor's four daughters, Abigail, twenty-one, and Mary, twelve. During the same year, Edward, the fourteen-year-old son of the Governor, started across country from Piketon to Burlington on horseback. The records show that the boy arrived at Burlington safely with an expenditure of only \$23.37½.

Favorable reports from the Territory of Iowa gradually modified Mrs. Lucas's determination to remain in Ohio, and she consented to visit Iowa and see how she liked it. Sometime during the year 1840 she came out to the frontier to join her husband. It is probable that Susannah, then seventeen, and Robert S., eight, came with their mother.

As Governor of the Territory of Iowa, Lucas resided at Burlington and there his daughter Abigail was married to Charles Nealley. The eldest daughter, Minerva, had married Horatio Sumner, a brother of her step-mother, in 1829. Mr. Lucas was removed from office in 1841 and soon afterwards moved to Bloomington (now Muscatine). Here for nearly two years the veteran statesman

lived a quiet life, occasionally speaking at a Democratic meeting or addressing a temperance society and now and again making trips to Burlington or Iowa City. Here Susannah Lucas became the wife of W. L. Smith.

By the beginning of 1843 Mrs. Lucas seems to have been convinced that she could be content to remain in Iowa permanently, and in March, 1843, Mr. Lucas purchased from the Territory of Iowa a building site in block twenty of the original plat of Iowa City. Before moving to Iowa City, however, a visit to Ohio was in order and in May, 1843, Robert Lucas and his family left Bloomington on the steamboat *Iowa* for a visit at Friendly Grove.

The pioneer statesman had been absent from Ohio for five years, but in August, 1843, a Democratic convention nominated him as a candidate for Congress. Had he been successful in the ensuing campaign, his predominating interests in Iowa might have come suddenly to an end, but he was defeated, and in the spring of 1844 he sold Friendly Grove, and returned to Iowa.

Mrs. Lucas, however, was not one to confine her interests to a few lots within a city block and in March, 1844, she purchased eighty acres of land — the east half of the southeast quarter of Section 15, Township 79, Range 6 — an area ly-

ing just a little south of the southern boundary of Iowa City, now Court Street. The site had originally been purchased from the Federal government by Samuel C. Trowbridge in 1843. There, in the fall of 1844, Mr. and Mrs. Lucas built a home patterned somewhat after their old residence at Friendly Grove. The new house was surrounded by a thicket of plum trees, so the place was appropriately named Plum Grove.

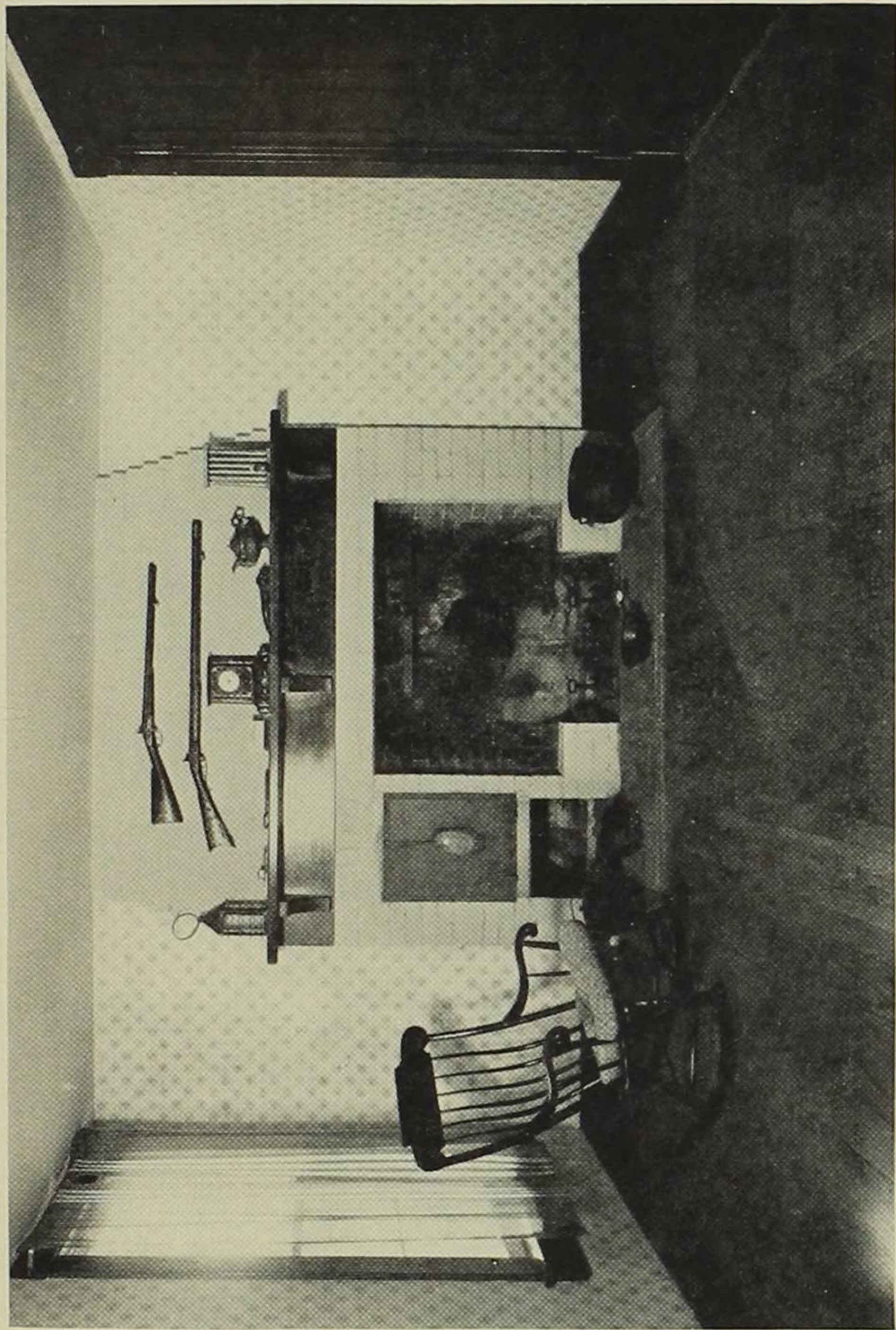
Log cabins were typical of pioneer days, but the Lucas house, like some of the more pretentious buildings in the thriving capital city, was constructed of the soft, red brick manufactured locally. The main part of the house consisted of a two-story structure about 30 x 30 feet in dimensions, with a one-story kitchen 14 x 14 feet in size projected on the south. The home afforded seven main rooms — four rooms downstairs and three upstairs, each with a fireplace. In addition there was a large buttry opening off the kitchen and a small room opening into the main bedroom. Under the north portion of the house was a large cellar with an outside and an inside entrance. Its walls were of stone, probably from the quarry just north of Iowa City.

The plumb brick walls were constructed by skilled hands, faced with hand-hewn white oak lath, and carefully covered with a superior grade

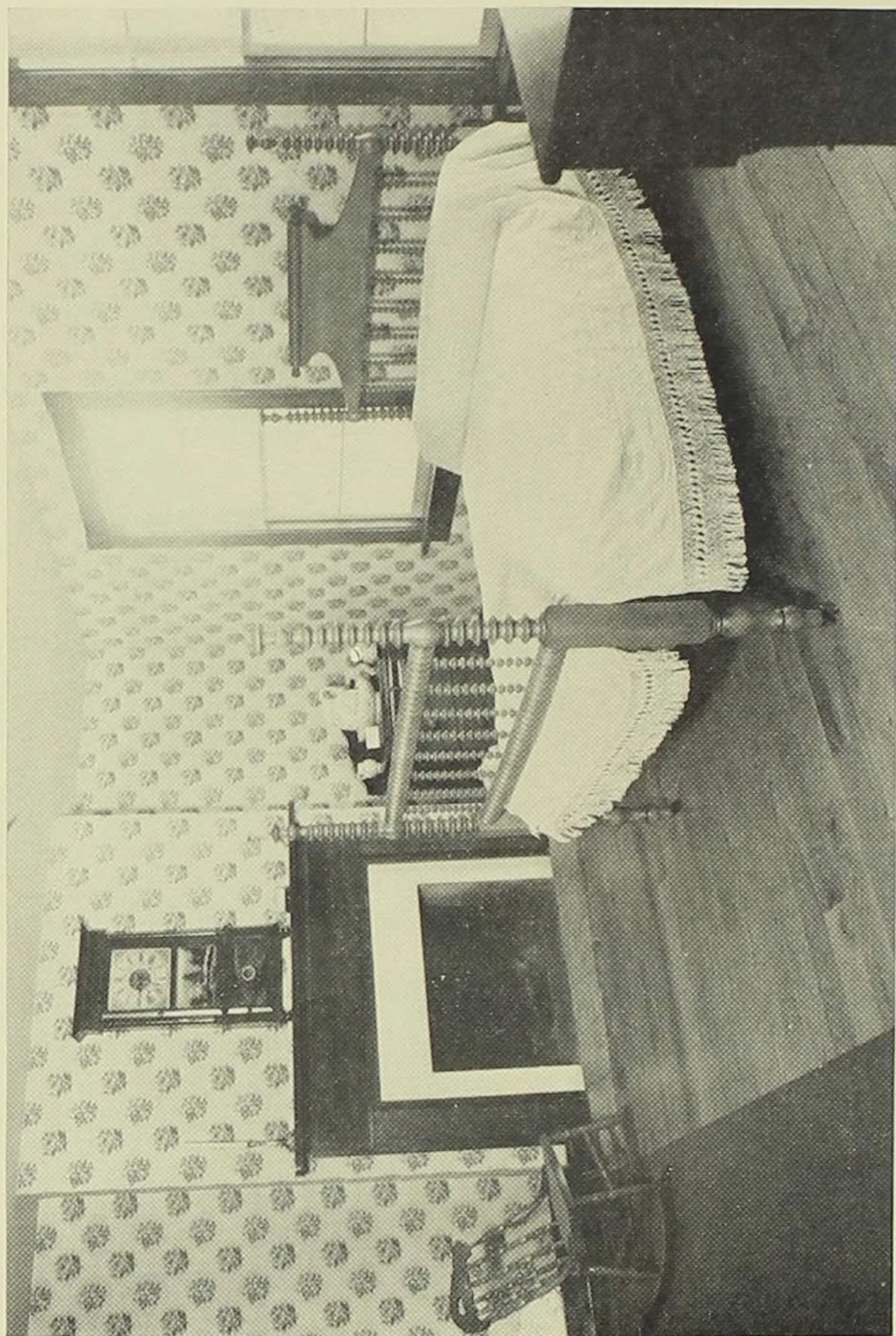
of plastering. The floors were of 1 x 6-inch white oak boards. The doors and door casings, the window frames, and the mantels above the fireplaces were of black walnut, cut from the local hillsides, as were also the curved staircase and the graceful balustrade. The furnishings in the Lucas home were undoubtedly typical of the best homes on the frontier, combining beautifully carved and polished articles with some more primitive and utilitarian.

In this home of simple dignity Robert and Friendly Lucas lived for almost a decade. With them lived a daughter Mary, who remained unmarried, and two sons — Edward W. and Robert S. For the former Governor and statesman, these were chiefly days of retrospect. He could look back across the years to his services in the War of 1812, to his nineteen years of legislative and political experiences in Ohio. He could recall, too, serving as chairman of the first National Democratic Convention. He remembered, also, his somewhat turbulent experiences with William B. Conway and the Iowa Territorial Assembly and the two boundary wars.

But not all was retrospect. Mr. Lucas was elected a member of the first constitutional convention which convened in the Capitol Building (now the Old Stone Capitol) in Iowa City, on



KITCHEN FIREPLACE LUCAS HOUSE



MASTER BEDROOM LUCAS HOUSE

October 7, 1844. When statehood finally came, in 1846, Robert Lucas, then in his sixty-fifth year, would gladly have accepted the governorship of the new State, but the veteran statesman was bypassed for a man of younger years.

Robert Lucas was thus left in retirement at his home at Plum Grove. His declining days were spent in quiet meditation, in writing verse on the margin of newspaper pages, and in leafing through a Bible and a well-worn Methodist hymnal. He died in February, 1853, at his home at Plum Grove. Friendly Lucas survived her husband by twenty years. In 1856 the city boundaries were extended southward as far as Wyoming Road (since 1888 Kirkwood Avenue), the northern boundary of Plum Grove farm, and in 1857 the Lucas Addition to Iowa City was platted on both sides of the Lucas house. The Lucas family retained ownership of the old home until 1866, when it was transferred to Walter Hoyt, whose daughter, Eleanor Hoyt Brainerd, was born there in 1868. After the sale of Plum Grove, Mrs. Lucas resided on Jefferson Street somewhere between Linn and Van Buren streets.

Plum Grove was owned by members of the Hoyt family until 1883, when it was sold to Jacob C. Switzer, who in 1923 platted the part north of the lot on which the house stood as the Switzer

Addition, selling the Lucas house and the land on which it stood to Morgan W. Davis. Two years later it was sold to Mr. and Mrs. William Hughes, from whom the house and four acres of land were purchased by the State of Iowa in 1941.

With the passing of the years, new owners and new tenants made various alterations in the home. A fire in the roof necessitated some reconstruction. A large two-story ell was added to the west and south of the original structure, and a large porch was built on the north and west sides of the dwelling. Six of the seven fireplaces were torn out or bricked in and plastered over. Here and there interior walls were moved. Some doors and windows were closed, sealed, and plastered over and new openings were provided. Areas in the white oak floors, worn by excessive traffic, were "patched with other material" — sometimes quite unlike the original.

The appearance of the premises in the twenties and thirties was not inviting. The plum trees had disappeared. In the yard were a number of gnarled and twisted old cottonwood trees. In the background a motley thicket of blackberry and raspberry bushes provided a hiding place for rabbits and other rodents. The outbuildings were shabby and leaning with the weight of many years, and the old dwelling itself gave perceptible

evidence that it had surrendered its former dignity and grandeur to the incessant and insistent demands of Father Time.

Interested citizens of Iowa City often talked of preserving this historic landmark, but the rain and winds of a score of summers and the sleet and snows of a score of winters drifted through the cracks and crevices to cause further deterioration and decay before any action was taken. In June, 1940, George D. Koser and William J. Petersen conferred with the owners relative to a proposed purchase of the property and acquired, for the nominal sum of one dollar, a ninety-day option to purchase the Lucas house and about eleven acres of land.

In November of the same year the "Governor Robert Lucas Memorial Association" was formed in Iowa City. The charter members were O. A. Byington, George D. Koser, William T. Hageboeck, Dr. E. J. Anthony, Frank J. Krall, Leroy S. Mercer, W. W. Mercer, Jessie B. Gordon, Mildred W. Pelzer, Celia N. Carson, Blanche D. Thoen, Ingalls Swisher, Thomas Farrell, Edward W. Lucas, and J. A. Swisher. This organization secured the coöperation of the Iowa State Conservation Commission and the Interim Committee in consummating a purchase for the State of the historic home and a little more than four acres of

land surrounding it for approximately \$5,000, a grant made by the Interim Committee.

The task of restoring the home to its original status, as near as may be, was a long and tedious process. Aside from members of the local association, some of the persons most interested were Fred J. Poyneer of Cedar Rapids and Mrs. Addison Parker of Des Moines, both members of the State Conservation Commission, and Mrs. Clinton L. Nourse of Des Moines, a grand-niece of Robert Lucas. The restoration of the building and the landscaping were directed by members of the staff of the Conservation Commission. The Society of Colonial Dames assisted in collecting and placing the furniture.

As a part of the restoration program the yard about the Lucas Home was leveled and reconditioned. More than a thousand plum trees, rose bushes, lilacs, and other appropriate shrubberies were planted to create conditions similar to those of Territorial days.

The house itself was completely rejuvenated and reconditioned. The large two-story ell and the front porch were removed, the rooms were remodeled to conform with their original status, with a fireplace and an American black walnut mantel in each of the seven main rooms. The floors were relaid with 1 x 6-inch white oak boards similar to

the original flooring, a new stairway was built, and the curved black walnut balustrade was refinished and replaced in its original position. Numerous coats of paint were removed from the outside of the building, and the brick walls were sandblasted, pointed up, and refinished to make them waterproof.

Inside the house, everything was made clean, dignified, and beautiful — just as the rooms must have appeared in the days of Robert and Friendly Lucas. Wall paper like that of Territorial days, designed and hand-blocked by Nancy McClelland, decorates the interior walls. Only a few pieces of furniture from the original Lucas home have been secured, so to give the house an atmosphere of human possession, pieces of furniture from the home of Samuel J. Kirkwood and from other Iowa homes of distinction have been placed in the rooms to supplement the Lucas furniture. A couch and a highboy of cherry from the Lucas home are to be added to the collection as soon as they have been refinished.

A visitor who enters the Lucas House from the front finds himself in a narrow hall. To his right a door leads into the parlor, straight ahead is the entrance to the dining room, and on the left a winding stairway leads to the floor above. A grandfather's clock in the hall reminds one of the

old days but pays no heed to the time of day. Will you walk into the parlor? The room is not large but it is formal and dignified. Over the walnut mantel on the west is a reproduction of a painting of Robert Lucas. A ceiling-high mirror in a gilt frame and an oval, marble-topped table are redolent of pre-Civil War days, but only the andirons in the fireplace were in the house when Robert Lucas was the master.

A door leads into a room facing the west which may have been used as a living room, the parlor in those days being often reserved for funerals and weddings, or it may have been used by Robert Lucas as a library and office. A secretary or desk, now in private hands, no doubt stood in this room.

From the study we step into an equally pleasant dining room with windows to the east. No Lucas furniture has been replaced in this room, but on the extension table of black walnut which stands in the center of the room is a doll in a glass case, a doll which belonged to a granddaughter whom Robert Lucas never saw — Isabel Ashley Lucas (1857–1867).

The dining room, of course, opens into the kitchen. Above the fireplace on the south wall is a muzzle-loading shotgun and a powder flask made from the horn of an ox or a buffalo. A typical old candle lantern and a candle mold rest on opposite

ends of the mantel — just as they may have stood in the days of yore. An old rocker, similar to that in which Friendly Lucas rested, stands by an east window. An old clock on the mantel is as silent as the house. The buttery, half as large as the kitchen, is empty now, but Friendly Lucas no doubt had it stored with flour, cured meats, vegetables, dried apples, cans of lard, and other supplies.

To go to the second floor, one must pass through the dining room to the front hall and climb the stairs. The walnut handrail is smooth and cool to the touch. A small hall at the top of the stairs opens into two of the three bedrooms. The room on the north, above the parlor, was the master bedroom, and was undoubtedly occupied by Robert and Friendly Lucas. Here is assembled a large share of the furniture reclaimed from the old Lucas home. A spool bed of cherry, a chest of drawers used as a washstand, a small chair with a seat of interlaced thongs of green deerhide, and an old mantel clock made in Bristol, Connecticut, were in the house, if not in this room, in the time of Lucas. One can imagine that a large four-poster bed once stood here. To the east is a small room with one window, which may have been intended for a child or for a closet.

To the south is another bedroom and through it one may pass into a third bedroom and from that

back into the hall. In each of these rooms there must have been a cord bedstead and a stand on which was a wash bowl and a large pitcher, with a smaller pitcher for hot water and a soap dish. On each mantel there stood, no doubt, a candlestick.

By the fall of 1946, restoration, long delayed because of the war, was substantially completed and on November 2nd, the Governor Lucas Home was dedicated as a State monument. With Senator Leroy S. Mercer presiding, State Conservation Commissioner Frank W. Mattes made the presentation and Governor Robert D. Blue accepted the historic shrine on behalf of the State of Iowa. And so Plum Grove is today one of Iowa's valued possessions. Tourists and interested citizens come from many parts of Iowa and from other States to visit this historic shrine, a memorial to a great man of two frontiers.

JACOB A. SWISHER