

THE PALIMPSEST

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Robert Lucas

A large crowd gathered on the Burlington levee early in the morning of August 15, 1838. News had spread that the steamboat *Brazil* was nearing port with Robert Lucas, the anxiously-awaited Governor of the Territory of Iowa, among her passengers. Mayor George Beeler, Cyrus S. Jacobs, William H. Starr, and William B. Conway, the Secretary of the Territory, were among the prominent citizens assembled on the river bank to welcome the new executive. Various reports had trickled westward concerning the character and personality of Robert Lucas. Every one knew that he was a man of action: his long career as a soldier and a politician was ample testimony of that. But what would his attitude be toward the new Territory of Iowa? Would he rule like a sergeant or be sympathetic with the needs of the people? Undoubtedly many who watched the *Brazil* dock hoped to read the destiny of the Territory in the countenance of the first Governor.

A brisk, erect, dignified figure strode down the gangplank of the *Brazil*. Although only about five feet ten inches in height, Robert Lucas probably seemed taller because of his straight military bearing. His thick wavy hair, frosted by fifty-seven years of intense activity, was combed straight back from his high forehead. Blue eyes, deep-set beneath beetling eyebrows, a slightly aquiline nose, straight firm mouth, all combined to give a somewhat severe expression to his thin face. Middle age had not robbed him of his vigor and restless energy. Grim determination, resourcefulness, and pride were basic qualities in the character of the courageous soldier and ambitious politician that was Robert Lucas.

Governor Lucas swung into action as soon as he arrived at Burlington. That very afternoon he issued a proclamation apportioning members of the Territorial legislature and providing for their election. Scarcely had this been done when an invitation was tendered him by leading Burlington citizens to attend a public dinner in his honor. Lucas thanked the committee graciously, but asked that the dinner be postponed until after he returned from a tour of the Territory. During the next three days he attended to problems of state and then set out on August 18th to visit the various towns as far north as Dubuque.

From early morning until late at night Lucas conferred with the leading citizens in each community. All were impressed with his sincerity, his energy, and his sterling character. A Dubuque editor liked his "plain and easy address" and commanding appearance. He believed this "practical farmer", whose constitution had been "shattered by toil", would "appreciate honest industry, and guard well its interest".

A descendant of sturdy Quaker ancestors who settled in Pennsylvania in 1679, Robert Lucas actually was a product of two frontiers. His father, William Lucas, was born in the wilds of western Virginia. There, at Shepherdstown, Robert Lucas was born on April 1, 1781. His early schooling consisted largely of mathematics and surveying, a training which proved invaluable when he moved to the Northwest Territory in 1800.

Despite his Quaker ancestry, Robert Lucas was distinctly a military man. Perhaps he inherited his warlike spirit from his father who had fought in the Revolutionary War. At any rate Lucas himself began his military career in 1803 when he received a commission from the Governor to enlist volunteers for the Ohio militia. From that beginning he rose in rank until he became a major general in the militia and a colonel in the United States Army. When the War of 1812 broke out

Lucas helped organize a battalion of volunteers from his militia. During the early part of the conflict he served as a detached officer in General William Hull's disastrous campaign. The daily journal which he kept clearly reveals his courage and resourcefulness whether employed as a scout or in the heat of battle. It also demonstrates his habit of meticulous care. When Colonel Lewis Cass made his report on Hull's discreditable conduct, he embodied sentences and even paragraphs from the daily record of Robert Lucas.

The soldier was also schooled in the ways of government and politics. As early as 1803 he began his career as a surveyor. Two years later he was appointed justice of the peace for Union Township in Scioto County. In 1808 he was elected to the lower house of the Ohio legislature. Between 1814 and 1830 he served all but two years as State Senator. Nominated for Governor by the Democrats in 1830, he was defeated but, having served meanwhile in the House of Representatives, he was again nominated for Governor in 1832 and this time emerged triumphant. A more significant partisan honor was his selection as temporary and permanent chairman of the Democratic Convention at Baltimore. He was re-elected Governor of Ohio in 1834 — an unusual tribute in the Buckeye State. His most notable

service to Ohio during his four years as chief executive was his victory in the Ohio-Michigan boundary dispute.

On September 4, 1838, soon after his return to Burlington, the Governor attended a "most sumptuous" banquet at which C. S. Jacobs acted as president. The customary thirteen prepared toasts and twenty-five volunteer toasts were drunk by the hundred guests present. After pointing out the salient facts in the new Governor's career, Jacobs offered the following tribute: "Our distinguished guest — We honor him as the gallant soldier in war — we honor him as the enlightened legislator and magistrate in peace, and we honor him for his virtue as a private citizen." A tremendous cheer greeted the Governor as he modestly arose in response.

Robert Lucas was not thinking of his military career, Ohio politics, or boundary troubles as he stood before his Burlington audience. Hopes for good government and a peaceful administration were uppermost in his mind. He was thinking of the amazing resources of the Territory and the admirable character of the settlers. Closing his speech, he proposed a toast to "The citizens of Iowa — Hospitable, intelligent, and enterprising. May their energies be united in support of such measures as are best calculated to advance the in-

terests of the Territory — promote virtue — increase intelligence — and secure the lasting prosperity and happiness of the people.”

Unfortunately for Lucas his three years as Governor of Iowa were destined to be as stormy as his career in Ohio. The seed of discord had been planted even before he set foot in the Territory. President Van Buren first offered the Governorship to General Henry Atkinson who refused the office. The delay and uncertainty caused much dissatisfaction in the Territory. Robert Lucas was finally commissioned on July 7th but did not hear of his appointment until ten days later, whereupon he promptly accepted. Preparing at once to assume his new duties, he left Cincinnati for Iowa on August 1st. Low water delayed the progress of his trip and he did not reach Burlington until two months after Congress had created the Territory.

Meanwhile, Secretary Conway had arrived and begun acting as Governor. Had he been less officious and attended only to emergencies, he would not have aroused the ire of Governor Lucas. But Conway, self-confident and ambitious, assumed more responsibilities than the circumstances warranted. On the very day Lucas arrived at Burlington he handed the Governor a copy of his proclamation apportioning members of the legislature

and ordering an election. No one knows what Robert Lucas said, but it is significant that he issued the proclamation himself and that Conway left for Davenport within an hour after the Governor's arrival. From that beginning William Conway was continually at odds with Robert Lucas. He opposed whatever the Governor proposed and stirred up dissension. In Lucas, however, he encountered a determined antagonist.

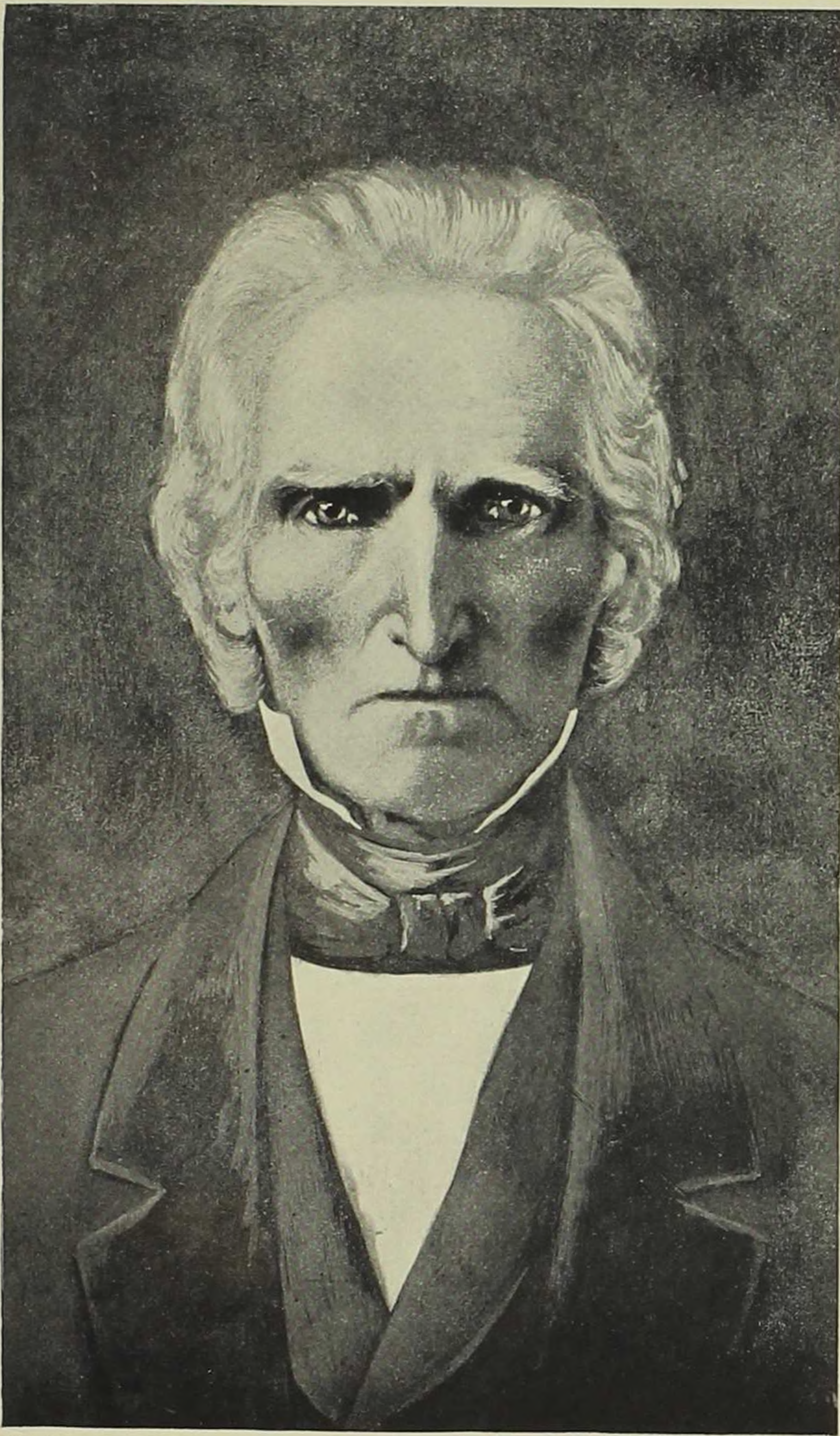
On November 12, 1838, the first Territorial legislature convened in the Methodist Church at Burlington. Most of the thirty-nine pioneer legislators were young men. They listened attentively as the Governor read his first message. It was a noteworthy document that clearly revealed the sagacity and long experience of Robert Lucas. Education, the compilation of a criminal code, the suppression of gambling and intemperance, the organization of an efficient militia, and strict economy in financial matters were but a few of the subjects on which the Governor recommended legislation.

The Legislative Assembly set to work with enthusiasm and a grave sense of importance. The first month of the session was marked by a sharp clash between Secretary Conway and the law makers over the purchase of penknives, tin cups, and similar perquisites. The Secretary's flippant,

sarcastic answer to the request deeply offended the Council which promptly informed him it would not "tamely submit to the insults and derision of any officer of this Territory". This quarrel had scarcely abated when a more serious dispute arose between the Governor and the legislature over Territorial expenditures. When Lucas refused to approve bills involving the payment of salaries for twenty-three assistants to the Legislative Assembly, the legislators promptly questioned his right to veto such measures, a right which was clearly provided in the Organic Act.

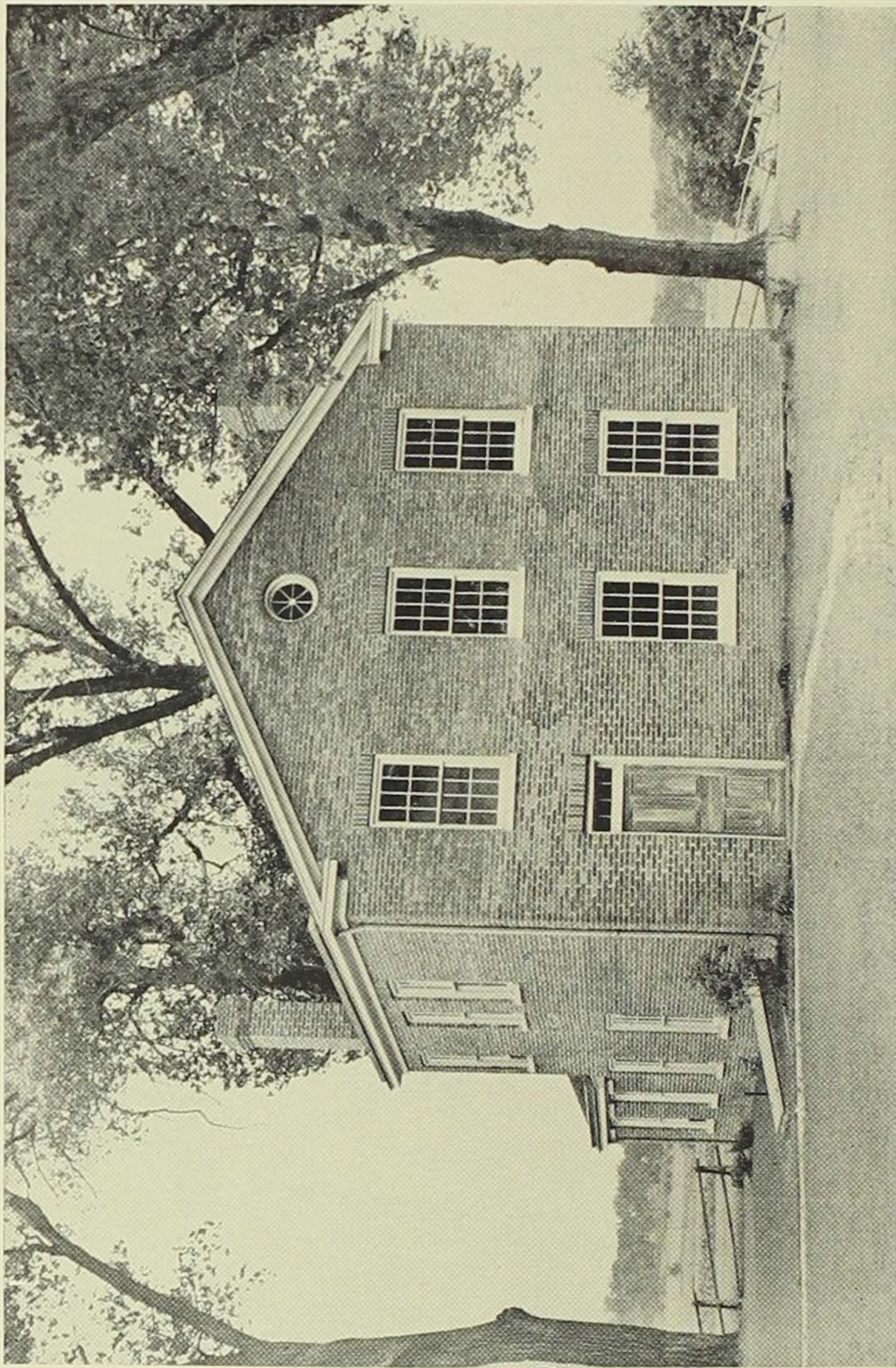
With characteristic determination Lucas stood firm throughout the controversy, displaying remarkable calmness for a man of such an impetuous nature. Although Conway and a small majority of the legislators sought his removal from office, many others saw the wisdom and legality of the Governor's position. When the session closed, Parvin recorded in his diary, "Legislature adjourned in confusion. All drunk with few exceptions."

The firm stand of Governor Lucas against the excesses of the Territorial legislature was supported by President Van Buren. At the same time the United States Treasury refused to pay the bills authorized by the legislature. Moreover, a letter from the Comptroller's office, on June 7,



FROM A PAINTING BY GEORGE H. YEWELL

ROBERT LUCAS



COURTESY OF THE IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN

ROBERT LUCAS HOUSE AT IOWA CITY

1839, showed serious discrepancies in the Secretary's accounts. The death of William B. Conway at Burlington during the opening days of the second Legislative Assembly probably saved him from many unpleasant situations and removed a thorn from the side of Robert Lucas.

The first year of Governor Lucas's administration had been marred by bitter internal controversy. The second year was destined to produce a stormy battle with Missouri over the southern boundary of the Territory of Iowa. As early as 1816 John C. Sullivan had surveyed an Indian cession which later was ambiguously identified with the northern boundary of the State of Missouri. The influx of settlers into the area north of this line after the Black Hawk Purchase caused Missouri to cast covetous glances in that direction. In 1836, the Governor was authorized by the State of Missouri to survey the northern boundary and J. C. Brown ran the line in the following year. This line would have deprived Iowa of a generous slice of the southern tier of Iowa counties. When Missouri ordered its officers to collect taxes in this area, Governor Lucas advised Van Buren County citizens to refuse. Not long afterward a Missouri sheriff was arrested and brought to Burlington. Thereupon, the Missouri militia was called to enforce the law while Lucas issued a proclamation

calling out the Territorial troops. After such a display of force the question was adjudicated.

Though the remainder of his administration was comparatively calm, the election of a Whig President led to the removal of Lucas in 1841. Many Iowans expressed genuine regret that his strong hand had been removed from the pilot wheel.

Robert Lucas was inordinately fond of politics. In 1843, five years after coming to Iowa, he returned to Ohio temporarily. His old friends prevailed upon him to run for Congress, but he was defeated and returned to Iowa City the following year. Straightway he was nominated by the Democrats as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1844. Although opponents accused him of being a "confirmed office-seeker", he won the election. His work on the committees on State Boundaries, State Revenue, and the Executive was statesmanlike.

When James K. Polk was elected President, Lucas hoped to be reappointed Governor of the Territory of Iowa but James Clarke was chosen. Two years later, when Iowa was about to be admitted into the Union, Lucas again fixed his eyes upon the Governorship. He was then sixty-five years old, however, and his uncompromising nature had made many enemies. Younger men entered the field and Ansel Briggs, who in 1839 had

carried a letter of introduction to Lucas from the Governor of Ohio, was nominated by the Democrats and elected first Governor of the State.

Robert Lucas retained his keen interest in public affairs to the very end. When he retired to the friendly atmosphere of Plum Grove he still found time to engage actively in the temperance movement, to advocate the development of the public school system, and to promote railroad building. At Burlington in 1839 he was chosen president of the Iowa Territorial Temperance Society. Thirteen years later his name was included in a select list of prominent temperance leaders in the United States. On December 14, 1848, in the Old Stone Capitol at Iowa City, Lucas was chosen president of a State convention of teachers and friends of education in Iowa. In the following year he became a member of the Board of Trustees of the State University of Iowa. Always a firm believer in the development of the West, Lucas in his later years transferred his support from canals to railroads. During 1850 he took a prominent part in two railroad conventions — one attended by the friends of the Dubuque and Keokuk Railroad, the other by proponents of the line from Davenport to Council Bluffs.

Despite the fact that he had been a Democrat for over half a century, Lucas revealed a remark-

able ability to break with the past. It required a great principle — the slavery issue — to cause him to forsake the Democratic party when Franklin Pierce was nominated and cast his vote for Winfield Scott, the Whig candidate. He even presided at a Scott meeting in Iowa City and gave an address which was "loudly and frequently cheered by the delighted audience, among which were a number of ladies." It was his last recorded political speech, made with conviction in the camp of his former opponents. He died at Plum Grove on February 7, 1853, and was buried at Iowa City.

Robert Lucas brought to the young Territory of Iowa the strong arm of the soldier and the steady influence of a practical politician. A crusading idealist, he accepted the Methodist faith at an early date. He detested gamblers and drinkers and would not appoint such men to office. He gave freely of his time and energy to all causes that embraced the common good. A man of intense convictions and genuine patriotism, Lucas never wavered in the cause of duty. His frank and rugged honesty must have left a deep imprint upon all who knew him. The history of Iowa was enriched by his political services.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN