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**March 7, 2012**

**THIS WEEK:**

**ORIGIN OF THE HISTORICAL DEPARTMENT OF IOWA**

**BACKGROUND:**

**Charles Aldrich**

Charles Aldrich served as Iowa Chief Clerk of the House of Representatives for the eighth (1860) and ninth (1862) general assemblies. He volunteered for the Union Army in 1862 and served with the Thirty-second Iowa Infantry for 18 months. Aldrich came to Webster City, Iowa, in 1857. He started the *Hamilton Freeman* newspaper. He was also involved in the publishing and editing of the *Dubuque Times* and *Marshall County Times*. In 1882, at age 53, he represented Hamilton County in the House of Representatives during the 19th General Assembly. He was appointed as the Curator of the State Historical Department at its creation in 1890.

**ORIGIN OF THE HISTORICAL DEPARTMENT OF IOWA**

(Verbatim from *The Annals of Iowa: A Historical Quarterly*, Edited by Edgar R. Harlan, curator; Published by the Historical Department of Iowa, Des Moines, 1913-15)

In the first biennial report, 1893, Charles Aldrich, founder and curator of the State Historical Department of Iowa, detailed its origin and purpose in the following language:

### **Need for the Department.**

At the capitals of most states collections of the data for their own history, and that of surrounding regions, have been in progress for many years in some from their first organization. Wisconsin, the model western state in this regard, has been engaged in this work fifty years. Kansas for nearly half that period. Possibly a like effort might have been instituted at the capital of Iowa, but the founding of the State Historical Society at Iowa City, in the year 1857, had the effect to inspire a belief that that organization was taking adequate care of this important interest. Such a result, however, was impossibility, for the society was destitute of the necessary funds. True, the organization has been kept up until now. The members, individually, have done everything in their power to increase the collections. \* \* \* All that the members could do was done, but no such institution, thus meagerly supported, can attain the ends sought. Meantime, the years were rolling by. The early settlers of the State were rapidly disappearing, either by death or removal to other regions, and all their recollections of pioneer times were fading away. Their places were occupied by new comers, who could not reasonably be expected to take much interest or pride in the Iowa of early days, for the reason that they knew little about it, and little of its history had been preserved.

### **Waste of Materials.**

No complete collection of our early public documents was in existence, and but few of the pioneer newspapers had been preserved. Precious books, which will one of these days be worth their weight in gold, were so fading from public knowledge as in many cases to have become almost wholly forgotten. Our prehistoric pottery and stone implements were being gathered up and largely sent abroad to enrich the museums and collections of other states. Even the fossils secured by one of our geological surveys, and costly engraved plates for their illustration paid for by the State met the same fate. To see and study these fossils at this time necessitates a journey to an eastern city. They would today form a most valuable addition these "type specimens" to a collection in our own capitol; but no effort was ever made to keep them here or at any other place in Iowa. If Iowa owned them now, no proposition to part with them would be entertained by anybody. While our statesmen upon the rostrum boasted the absence of illiteracy in Iowa, and pointed with pride to the magnificent record of Iowa soldiers during the great civil war, it was continually pleaded that this State, free from debt, could not afford to collect the necessary data for her own history, nor preserve from waste the archaeological treasures yielded by her own soil, or even mementos of our early settlers and soldiers. It is a fact not to be proud of a strange anomaly that so many of the public documents published by State authority prior to 1860 are not now in the capitol nor represented in any collection. Of many, not a single copy is known to be in

existence, nor were the originals preserved in the offices whence they emanated. It is to stop this waste to repair, as far as practicable, the losses which have already occurred, to build up collections incidental to such work, and contributing greatly to its usefulness and to the everyday instruction and enjoyment of the people, to save up precious materials which shall illustrate to future times the history of our own, that the efforts of the Historical Department have been devoted during the year and a half of its existence. That these are worthy ends no one, I believe, will at this day question.

### **Original Steps.**

The history of the origin of this effort may be briefly summarized as follows: In the year 1884, Mrs. Aldrich and I presented to the State, through the Trustees of the State Library, a simple Autograph Collection, proposing if it should be placed in cases in the Library, and properly cared for, to make further additions to its contents, as well as to illustrate it with portraits of the celebrities represented, adding biographical data. This offer was accepted. In due time a case was made, and later on another, from funds appropriated to furnishing the edifice. But no one else was willing to undertake to arrange the materials in the cases. I was, therefore, compelled to come to Des Moines and do this work, or let the enterprise fail. We also continued to make additions to the Collection, both by purchase and solicitation. In 1888 the two cases were filled to overflowing, and two more were needed. The legislature that session put an item in the general appropriation bill, allowing \$1,000 to be expended for the care and preservation of objects in literature, art and science, which should be presented to the State. Of this the sum of \$900 was used in building two more cases.

### **Moral Support.**

But when the Pioneer Law Makers' Association held their second reunion, in the winter of 1890, the Collection was made the subject of commendatory resolutions, in which the legislature then in session, was earnestly requested to sustain the work. A committee from that body visited the two houses and presented the resolutions. As a result of this action a bill was passed by the unanimous vote of both branches of the General Assembly, appropriating \$3,000 for this purpose, with a provision directing the collection of documents, papers, etc., "relating to the earlier days of our Territory and State." Upon its approval I was appointed by the trustees of the State Library to prosecute the work, with an allowance of \$100 per month during the year 1890 and '91. I continued, therefore, to increase and strengthen the original collection, as well as to collect data for State history. I had no rooms at the time, and the accumulations were simply piled up in a corner. At the next meeting of the Pioneer Law Makers' Association this work was made the subject of a further appeal to the legislature many of the leading newspapers of the State had commended it, urging the founding of a

permanent Historical Department in the State House. Governor Larrabee spoke of our work very kindly in his biennial message of 1890, as also did Governor Boies in 1892.

### **First Legislation.**

As a result of this agitation a bill was introduced in the Senate by Col. C. H. Gatch of Polk county, providing for the establishment of a Historical Department, and making the original "Aldrich Collection" a part of the work. This bill passed the Senate by a unanimous vote and the House by 67 yeas to 14 nays. It also provided for the appointment of a Curator, who should hold his office six years. The three lower southeast rooms in the capitol, originally designed for the State Historical Society, were set apart for this purpose. The work is placed under the authority of the eight Trustees of the Iowa State Library. At a meeting held for the purpose of organizing the Department, I was appointed Curator, and with the approval of the Trustees I appointed Hon. B. F. Gue as my assistant. The new rooms were opened on the first day of July, 1892.

That the State should build up and fairly maintain a great Historical Museum, wherein should be secured as large collections as practicable in State and National history, literature, art, military relics and mementos, natural history, geology, archaeology, numismatics, etc., as it is practicable to bring together, would seem to have become the settled belief of the people. Such an institution should be kept growing, for "a finished museum is a dead museum." There is apparently no end to the amount of materials which may be readily obtained for this purpose. The great need is a place in which they can be safely kept and conveniently exhibited.



**Charles Aldrich**

(State Historical Society of Iowa)

(b. October 2, 1828 – d. March 8, 1908)

## **From Pioneer Lawmakers 1890**

*Resolved*, That as the early history of every State is a matter of great importance, and the historical collections in the State library, known as the "Aldrich Collection," are now, and in coming years will be of great value, and the time and labor necessary to be spent in attending to the same are more than any private citizen can afford to give without compensation; therefore, we respectfully ask the General Assembly to make a sufficient appropriation therefor.

The motion of Senator McNutt in regard to the Aldrich collection was adopted unanimously.

Mr. Russell: Mr. Chairman, we passed a resolution some time ago here in relation to the Aldrich Collection, which was introduced by my friend Senator McNutt. That resolution contemplated some legislative action favorable to the collection and to help Mr. Aldrich. There was no provision made in the resolution, I believe, for bringing it particularly to the attention of the Legislature. I would therefore propose that the resolution be referred to the committee that has been already appointed to bring the matter of the publication of our proceedings before the legislative bodies. Motion carried.

**1890**  
**Chapter 64**  
**Historical Records**

CHAPTER 64.

HISTORICAL RECORDS.

AN ACT providing for the collection and preservation of historic records and other valuable material pertaining to the history of Iowa and making an appropriation therefor. S.F. 303.

Whereas, The Aldrich Collection of autograph letters, manuscripts and portraits, now in the State Library, is of great value to the State, and it is important that it shall be increased— Aldrich collection increased.

And Whereas, The time, labor and money, necessary to this work are more than any individual can afford to give without compensation—

And Whereas, Also, it is believed that many valuable documents, relating to the earlier days of our territory and state have been destroyed, mislaid or misplaced, or are in danger of destruction or loss—Now therefor— Early records.

*Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Iowa:*

SECTION 1. That there be and is hereby appropriated out of any money in the treasury not otherwise appropriated the sum of three thousand dollars, to be expened under the direction of the trustees of the state library, for the accomplishment of the work of adding to said Aldrich Collection, and that of searching for, restoring and safely preserving the papers and documents aforesaid. Said trustees of the Iowa state library shall solicit contributions to said collection, receive and properly acknowledge the receipt of the same and they shall have the power to appoint and employ all persons necessary for the work aforesaid, to fix their compensation, and do all other things necessary to the accomplishment of the purposes of this act. All accounts and expenditures under this act shall be audited by the executive council and warrants therefor drawn by the Auditor of State: Provided, that not to exceed one half the sum hereby appropriated shall be drawn during the year 1890; and that in no event shall there be more expended under this act, for the year 1890 and 1891 than the said sum of three thousand dollars. \$3,000 appropriated.

SEC. 2. This act being deemed of immediate importance shall take effect and be in force from and after its publication in the Iowa State Register and the Des Moines Leader, newspapers published at Des Moines Iowa. Contributions solicited.

Approved April 10, 1890. One-half drawn in 1890.

I hereby certify that the foregoing act was published in the Iowa State Register April 16 and the Des Moines Leader April 17 1890.

FRANK D. JACKSON, Secretary of State.