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Brief History of the State
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A BRIEF HISTORY
OF
THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF IOWA

1857-1907



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THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF IOWA 1857-1907

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE STATE
HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

THERE are times and circumstances which seem to inspire a larger interest in matters historical—times especially when the human mind cherishes what has been, times when the past touches the human imagination even to sympathy. The discovery of new scientific truths, for example, provokes curiosity in the history of scientific truth discovery; the elevation of men to high positions of trust, honor, or power among their fellows stimulates biography; while a people aroused by formative events, dramatic episodes, or by anniversaries to a consciousness of change, progress, or political unity, invariably turn with no little pride to the annals of their social and political evolution.

In our own Commonwealth of Iowa the revision of the Constitution in 1857 seems to have been the event which occasioned the first formal expression of the conviction that the history of this State was worthy of

preservation. And yet this conviction itself had surely been born of earlier days. That it had been maturing gradually for more than two decades was natural and could hardly have been otherwise. The courageous pioneers, who in the thirties and forties of the last century crossed half a continent to make permanent homes in Iowa, must have realized as they blazed their names on primæval oaks or drove their stakes deep into the prairie land that their lives were indeed part of a great movement which would some day become truly historic.

Many rare and inspiring experiences were in store for those who crossed the Mississippi prior to 1857. The beauties of nature untouched were theirs; and theirs, too, was the freedom of opportunity. During the lifetime of a single generation the pioneers beheld the evolution of a community of men and women from a few simple families to a complex society; and as participants in that social and political transformation they successfully established and maintained law and order on the frontier. These early settlers founded social and political institutions. They participated in the organization

and administration of the highest form of Territorial government which the genius of our people has yet devised. Earnestly they mingled their labors with the virgin soil of the richest prairies of all America. Beneath their eyes a thousand hills were stripped of forests and more than a million acres of prairie land were turned into corn fields. The hardships and privations which they endured remain largely untold.

During the early forties the pioneers took part in an agitation for a State government. In 1845 they twice rejected the boundaries prescribed by Congress. In 1846 they formed the Constitution under the provisions of which Iowa was organized as a State and admitted into the Union. Having witnessed the birth of "the only free child of the Missouri Compromise," these Iowa pioneers enthusiastically applauded their Governor when in 1854 he declared that it was fitting that this State of Iowa should let the world know "that she values the blessings which that Compromise has secured her, and that she will never consent to become a party to the nationalization of slavery." In 1856 they made preparations for a third con-

stitutional convention and witnessed the birth of the political party which, with but one exception, has dominated the politics of the State even unto this day. Finally, in the eventful year of 1857 they were seriously engaged in drafting anew their code of fundamental law.

Many of the pioneers had now passed middle life. With axes and plows they had bravely fought the battles of the frontier; and now they had begun to enjoy some of the fruits of victory. They loved to tell the story of "the early days." At the fireside they lived over and over again the history of their lives. The hardships and privations through which they had passed were now endeared to them. They were proud of the great Commonwealth which they had founded. The marvelous transformations which they had witnessed stirred their imaginations. They felt that somehow their own humble lives were really a part of history; and so they resolved "to rescue from oblivion the memory of the early pioneers." Thrice fathers—fathers of the Frontier, fathers of the Territory, fathers of the State—the unschooled pioneers of Iowa now be-

came the fathers of our local provincial history.

It was in January, 1857, while the Third Constitutional Convention was revising the Constitution of the State in the Old Stone Capitol at Iowa City, that the Sixth General Assembly, which was then in session in the same historic building, voted a permanent annual appropriation "for the benefit of a State Historical Society."¹

To be sure, discussion of the importance and value of such a society had preceded and in a way called forth this action of the General Assembly; but the movement was not fully organized until February 7, 1857, when a Constitution for the "State Historical Society of Iowa" was adopted. The provisions of this simple instrument have continued to be the basis of the organization of the Society for half a century.

According to the original Constitution of 1857, the State Historical Society of Iowa consisted of members who were admitted upon election by the Society, or by the Board

¹By a vote of the Board of Curators on March 3, 1857, "the present members of the Constitutional Convention and the General Assembly were elected members of the Society."

of Curators, and the payment of an "admittance fee" of three dollars. The members of the Society held regular annual meetings at which officers were elected and new members admitted.

The officers of the Society consisted of "a President, six Vice Presidents, a Corresponding Secretary, a Recording Secretary, a Treasurer, Librarian, and eighteen Curators," who were chosen annually. Article seven of the Constitution constituted the Curators "the Executive Department of this Association" with "full power to manage its affairs." In April, 1869, a series of "By-Laws" was adopted, which, among other things, provided for officers and monthly meetings of the Board of Curators, fixed the quorum thereof, prescribed an order of business, and named the standing committees.

After the lapse of nearly half a century it is interesting to observe the aims and functions of this Historical Society as indicated in chapter III of the Constitution of 1857. This chapter, which is entitled "Object," reads as follows: "The object of this Society shall be to collect, embody, arrange and preserve in authentic form, a library of

books, pamphlets, maps, charts, manuscripts, papers, paintings, statuary and other materials illustrative of the history of Iowa; to rescue from oblivion the memory of its early pioneers; to obtain and preserve narratives of their exploits, perils and hardy adventures; to secure facts and statements relative to the history, genius, progress or decay of our Indian tribes, to exhibit faithfully the antiquities, and the past and present resources of the State; and to promote the study of history by lectures, and diffuse and publish information relating to the description and history of Iowa."

At the outset the State seems to have had no direct control over the organization and administration of the Society. As time went on, however, the feeling arose that the State Historical Society of Iowa should be brought into closer relations with the State. This was certainly a legitimate demand since the Society existed for public purposes and was supported by State appropriations. Accordingly, the Fourteenth General Assembly passed "An Act to Reorganize the State Historical Society," which was approved April 23, 1872.

The act of 1872 was for the most part a compilation of the provisions of the Constitution and By-laws which the Society had already adopted. Some significant changes were, however, introduced. The Curators were thereafter to hold office for two years, and nine of the eighteen were to be appointed by the Governor of the State. The annual meeting of the Society was to be held "on the Monday preceding the last Wednesday in June of each year." Section five empowered the Board of Curators to "choose annually, or oftener, if need be, a corresponding secretary, recording secretary, a treasurer, and a librarian. . . . from the members outside of their own number." These officers were to serve as officers of both the Society and the Board of Curators. A President was likewise chosen by the Curators, but from their own number. He presumably held the same office in the Society. It was further provided by this act that "No officer of the Society or of the Board shall receive any compensation from the State appropriation to the Society."

Whatever may have been its political and legal status prior to 1872, it is certain that

by the act of April 23d of that year the State Historical Society of Iowa was made a *State institution* in the fullest sense of the term. Since 1872 no change of any importance has been made in the organic law of the Society; so that today the Code provisions are substantially those of the act of 1872.

It can hardly be said that the State Historical Society of Iowa was, in its earlier years, liberally supported by the State. The idea seems to have prevailed that the library and collection, would somehow grow by voluntary contributions, and that with little or no expense the materials of history would find their way to the store-rooms of the Society. By the act of January, 1857, the sum of \$250 was appropriated as a permanent annual allowance. In 1860 the annual allowance was increased to \$500. Twenty years later it was fixed at \$1000. In 1902 the permanent annual support of the Society was raised to \$2500. And finally in 1904 it was placed at \$7500. In the meantime several special appropriations were voted for the benefit of the Society. The first special appropriation was made in 1868, when in "An

Act in relation to the State Historical Society," \$3000 annually for two years was appropriated. In 1892 a second special appropriation of \$1000 for the biennial period was voted. Again in 1900 the Society received a special appropriation of \$2000. The last of the special appropriations was made in 1902 and amounted to \$9500.

In the original act of appropriation, as well as in subsequent statute and code provisions, the State Historical Society is referred to as "in connection with and under the auspices of the State University." Precisely what was to be understood by these words was not clearly defined. The expression, however, has never been interpreted to mean that any organic connection existed between the two institutions. The State Historical Society of Iowa remains to this day an independent State institution, whose organization, support, and management are in no way connected with the State University. It is probable that the provisions of the act of 1857 aimed to secure the permanent location of the Society at Iowa City, where it would "be fostered by the literary and scientific influences of the University."

The only material assistance which has ever been rendered by the University consisted of providing rooms for the Society from 1857 to 1868 and again from 1901 to this day.¹

Although Iowa City, the historic capital of Iowa and the seat of the State University, has been the most fitting location for the State Historical Society, the library and collections of this Society have not always had satisfactory accommodations. At first rooms in the Old Stone Capitol were assigned by the Trustees of the University. These quarters were occupied by the Society until September, 1862, when other rooms were assigned in the "Mechanics Academy." This building was occupied by the Historical Society until March, 1865. It was at this time that the Trustees of the University

¹At a meeting of the Board of Curators in 1866, Colonel S. C. Trowbridge said that "he [Trowbridge] was at the first organization of this Society, which was born after the politicians had swapped off all the public institutions that had been located at Iowa City, and arranged for their removal to other parts of the State, and the object of placing the Historical Society under the auspices of the University was to insure its permanent location at this point.

" If allowed to remain here it will be fostered by the literary and scientific influences of the University."—
From the Records of the Board of Curators, March 2, 1866.

passed a resolution authorizing the Society to use "the Library Room and Cabinet of the University for their purposes as a Society, with leave to hold the annual meetings of the Society in the University Chapel." This arrangement proved unfortunate in that it gave rise to misunderstanding, controversy, and no little ill feeling between the two State institutions.

In June, 1866, the Trustees of the University "*Resolved*, That the Historical Society be requested, so soon as they can, to surrender the government of the Society to the Trustees of the State University, and after thorough examination, if they consider that they have not sufficient authority to do so, that they petition the Legislature for such authority; and in the meantime, as a condition of occupying a room in the University, that they employ as their Librarian the Librarian of the University, and on failure to comply with this condition by the first day of September, 1866, the Executive Committee are hereby authorized and empowered to have the effects of the Historical Society removed from the University building at the expense of the University." The

Curators of the Historical Society believing the performance on their part of such an act would be clearly a violation of their oath of office did not comply with the request of the Trustees.

Again in June, 1867, the Trustees of the University after a further consideration of the relation of the Historical Society to the University, passed this resolution: "*Resolved*, That the State Historical Society be permitted, until otherwise ordered, to occupy the present library-room, upon the removal of the present library of the University therefrom, which occupancy shall only be upon the following conditions: The said State Historical Society shall at their first annual meeting adopt the following: 1. The property in the custody of the State Historical Society shall be, and remain, under the ultimate control of the Board of Trustees of the State University, and in case said Board deem it for the security or preservation of said property to assume such control they may do so. 2. That said property in the custody of the Society shall not be removed from the University Buildings, ex-

cept by the consent of the said Board of Trustees. 3. That at each regular annual session of said Board of Trustees, the said Historical Society shall report to the Board the conditions and operations of the Society generally. 4. That regulations shall at all times exist by which the instructors and pupils of the State University shall have access to the collections of the Society for the proper uses of the University. 5. That at the coming session of the Legislature, the General Assembly be requested to declare and define a permanent connection to exist, as above contemplated, between the State University and the State Historical Society. 6. That the immediate management of the operations of the State Historical Society be left to the Society itself."

Again the Curators declared that they could not, "in view of their obligations to the Historical Society and the laws of the State under whose authority they are acting," accept rooms in the University on the conditions proposed by the Trustees. When they met in August the Curators rejected *seriatim* and by unanimous vote all of the conditions of the resolution. A few months

later the Curators submitted to the Governor their regular biennial report, in which, after adverting to the relations then existing between the Society and the University, they made the following appeal to the General Assembly:

"It is therefore earnestly desired by the Society, that the true intent and meaning of the relation intended by the Legislature, as expressed in the words 'auspices,' in the law referred to, may be clearly set forth.

"If a *bona fide* relationship is therein intended, we ask that the Trustees of that Institution shall be instructed to provide an appropriate and permanent place for the use of the Society, and that they may be taught to regard it as having a claim upon the protection and aid of the State, through, and derivable from, the appropriations made to the State University.

"On the contrary, if there is no tangible link of connection, then we respectfully request that an appropriation for the purpose of procuring and fitting up a room for the Society, be made direct to it, to be disbursed by some authorized responsible party." The only direct and evident result of this appeal

was the special appropriation of 1868, which enabled the Society to secure and fit up for its special uses rooms outside of the University buildings.

In June, 1868, the Curators leased the "Old Stone Church" on Burlington Street, and soon thereafter the association of the State Historical Society with the State University was completely severed. In the meantime the Society had fortified its independence still further by securing articles of incorporation. The historical library remained in the damp musty basement of the "Old Stone Church" until the fall of 1882, when it was removed to better quarters in a building on Washington Street. In September, 1901, the library and collections of the Society were finally transferred from the Washington Street building to the Hall of Liberal Arts on the campus of the State University.

From the provisions of its Constitution it is clear that the publication as well as the collection and preservation of the materials of history is one of the principal objects for which the State Historical Society of Iowa was established. The various publications

which have been issued since 1857 may be grouped under four heads.

First, the official biennial reports which have appeared regularly every two years since the organization of the Society in 1857.

Secondly, the quarterly publications, of which there have been three series, namely:

THE ANNALS OF IOWA.

THE IOWA HISTORICAL RECORD.

THE IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS

The first number of *The Annals* appeared in January, 1863. Thereafter the quarterly numbers were issued regularly until December, 1874, when the series was suspended for want of funds. *The Annals* complete consists of twelve volumes. In January, 1885, the first number of *The Iowa Historical Record* was issued. This was "the resumption in fact of *The Annals of Iowa*." Of *The Iowa Historical Record* series there are eighteen volumes. The last number bears the date of October, 1902. The first number of *The Iowa Journal* bears the date of January, 1903. Four volumes of this series have thus far been issued.

Thirdly, the miscellaneous publications, of which the most important are:

DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL RELATING TO THE HISTORY OF IOWA (3 vols.)

FRAGMENTS OF THE DEBATES OF THE IOWA CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTIONS OF 1844 AND 1846, ALONG WITH PRESS COMMENTS AND OTHER MATERIALS ON THE CONSTITUTIONS OF 1844 AND 1846

THE MESSAGES AND PROCLAMATIONS OF THE GOVERNORS OF IOWA (7 vols.)

THE EXECUTIVE JOURNAL OF IOWA, 1838-1841

THE ROBERT LUCAS JOURNAL OF THE WAR OF 1812

ROBERT LUCAS: A BIOGRAPHY

THE CONSTITUTION AND RECORDS OF THE CLAIM ASSOCIATION OF JOHNSON COUNTY, (Iowa)

THE CONSTITUTION OF IOWA (pocket edition)

IOWA CITY, A CONTRIBUTION TO THE EARLY HISTORY OF IOWA

AMISH MENNONITES IN IOWA

IOWA HISTORICAL LECTURES, 1892

IOWA HISTORICAL LECTURES, 1894

But more inspiring than statutes, appro-

priations, or publications are the names of the men who as officers and members have been connected with the Society during the past half century. At the head of the list stands the name of James Wilson Grimes. As the first President, both of the Society and of the Board of Curators, Grimes was indeed a worthy predecessor of such men as Ralph P. Lowe, Samuel J. Kirkwood, William G. Hammond, George G. Wright, Josiah L. Pickard, and Peter A. Dey.

Among the Vice-Presidents of the Society were men of the same high character and public renown, as witness the names of James Harlan, Charles Mason, Thomas S. Wilson, William M. Stone, John F. Dillon, Lucien H. Langworthy, John P. Irish, and William B. Allison.

In the long line of Curators one meets the names of J. B. Grinnell, Thomas H. Benton, Jr., T. S. Parvin, G. W. McCleary, P. M. Cassady, Charles Negus, Silas Totten, Wm. Penn Clarke, James Wilson, J. F. Duncombe, John A. Kasson, D. N. Richardson, and Geo. D. Perkins.

The roll of members is longer and some-

what more provincial. But even here one finds the names of George Bancroft, Jared Sparks, William Cullen Bryant, William H. Prescott, Horace Greeley, and Theodore Parker.

Such are the historical beginnings of the State Historical Society of Iowa as founded and fostered by the pioneers. Without, perhaps, much knowledge of critical history and without academic training they sowed the seeds of a local provincial history which have grown and matured into ripened grain. To gather the harvest and withal to sift the grain is the duty of the present hour.



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