

A Forgotten Iowa Author

ISSN 0003-4827

Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.



This work has been identified with a [Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0](#).

Recommended Citation

"A Forgotten Iowa Author." *The Annals of Iowa* 4 (1899), 233-235.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.2412>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

A FORGOTTEN IOWA AUTHOR.

In the course of his article on "The Fugitive Slave Case" in the last number of this publication, Mr. George Frazee paid a deserved tribute to the memory of Dr. Edwin James, of Burlington, Iowa. Those who read that article will remember that Dr. James was a "station agent" on the "Underground Railroad" through which southern slaves escaped to Canada, and that he undertook the protection of the negro who was arrested by the slave hunter from Missouri; and that while he was very quiet he was none the less determined in his effort to secure justice for the alleged slave. If not wholly forgotten, Dr. James is remembered by very few people in our State. He was born at Weybridge, Vermont, August 27, 1797, and died near Burlington, Iowa, October 28, 1861. He graduated at Middlebury College, Vermont, in 1816, and studied medicine at Albany, New York, with his brother Dr. Daniel James, botany with Dr. John Torrey, and geology with Prof. Amos Eaton. In 1820 he was appointed botanist and geologist in the expedition to the Rocky mountains, under the command of Maj. Samuel H. Long. Upon the return of the expedition he was employed two years in compiling and preparing its history for the press. This was comprised in two octavo volumes with an atlas of maps and illustrative engravings. The work was published in Philadelphia and also in London, in 1823.

Dr. James was afterwards appointed surgeon in the regular army and for six years was stationed at different frontier forts. He studied several of the native Indian dialects during this period and prepared a translation of the New Testament into the Ojibway language. After his resignation from the army in 1830, he returned to Albany where he was associated for a time with Edward C. Delevan in the editorship of *The Temperance Herald and Journal*. He also prepared for the press "The Narrative of John Tanner," a strange frontier character who had been stolen from his white parents and grew up to manhood among the New York Indians. Dr. James removed to Iowa in 1836 and settled upon a farm three or four miles from Burlington, where he remained until his death. He was the earliest botanical explorer of the Rocky mountains and the first man to ascend Pike's Peak. In fact, that celebrated mountain was for some time known as James' Peak, the name given to it by Maj. Long. Dr. James' report of the Expedition to the Rocky Mountains had quite a large circulation at the time of its publication, but it has been long out of print and at the present time can only occasionally be found in second hand book-stores. It is a work of very decided merit, containing a large amount of information in regard to the Indians of Iowa, Missouri and the region farther west, as well as of the botany, geology, natural history and physical features of the region traversed by Long's Expedition.

Accessible personal details regarding Dr. James are quite meager. He led a very quiet life from the time of settling upon his Burlington farm until his death, but his sympathetic and plucky interference in behalf of the colored man whose freedom was menaced, proves that his instincts ran

in the direction of the largest humanity and that he possessed the courage of his convictions. In many places in his deeply interesting narrative he displays the warmest sympathy for the poor dogs and horses which accompanied the expedition and "by the wayside fell and perished," paying touching tributes to their fidelity and sagacity. He deeply regretted the wanton and useless destruction of the buffaloes and other wild animals—at that day (1820) existing in countless millions—predicting that the time of their extermination was not far distant.

Dr. Charles A. White, State Geologist of Iowa, from 1866 to 1870, but now of Washington, D. C., was a boy in Burlington during the later years of the useful life of Dr. James. In reply to recent inquiries he wrote as follows:

I knew Dr. Edwin James only by sight, and not by association or communication. He was a man of alert expression and manner but dignified reserve. His speech was brief, grammatical and concise in structure. I doubt if he ever gave his confidence to any man, even to his passengers on the Underground R. R., though they doubtless all believed in him. I knew by common report that he lived * * * * * four miles west of Burlington—that his wife lived there with him, and died there a short time before his own decease, and that he continued the management of his "station" until his death. I have heard that he died there practically alone.

Since the foregoing was prepared the writer has visited the home of Dr. Edwin James, some four miles west of Burlington. It is a large, old-fashioned, white stone house, about 24x40 feet, with a deep basement, two stories and an attic—a roomy, comfortable home. It is situated in a beautiful, secluded spot, and is not in sight from the present country road. Dr. James planted an orchard of which a few quite large apple trees still remain. The place years ago passed out of the possession of his heirs and is now owned by a substantial German farmer. The reputation of Dr. James as a practical abolitionist—one who sped the hunted slave on his way northward—still lingers in that neighborhood, and a few people in Burlington yet treasure his memory. He was quite a large land owner in the vicinity of his residence—a substantial citizen. The present occupant states that an artfully contrived, hidden recess existed behind the chimney of this house, in which tradition says that the negroes were hidden from their pursuers. Dr. James came to his death by accident. He fell from a load of wood and the wheels of the wagon passed over his body, death ensuing in a few hours.

Within a few years a demand has arisen for new editions of some of the narratives of early explorations west of the Mississippi and several have appeared. It would seem that a work so important as "Long's Expedition," by Dr. Edwin James, must also again be wanted.

IN THE article on "The Early Homes and Home-Makers of Iowa," in preceding pages, its author, Dr. Charles A. White, speaks of the "ruinously extortionate interest" which poor settlers were obliged to pay for money to purchase their lands from the Government. He mentions no rates of inter-

est, but it is a well-remembered fact, that in the year 1857 hundreds of settlers in northwestern Iowa were paying 40 per cent. per annum, and we presume like rates had prevailed all over the State while the lands were being entered. This was due to many causes: interest here, as in all new countries, was very high; people were poor and compelled to raise money to purchase their lands; and those fortunate "land-sharks" who could command gold or silver coin were in position to exact this extravagant rate for the use of their money. Later on, as some of these "land-sharks" began to show a craving for political honors, one of the serious charges urged against them was this, of exacting "40 per cent. interest" from the poor settlers.

U. S. SENATOR GEORGE F. HOAR of Massachusetts, in a chapter of political recollections published in *Scribners' Magazine* for February, 1899, relates how nearly Senator Allison of Iowa, came to being nominated as the Republican candidate for President of the United States in 1888. We print so much of the copyrighted article as refers to this historical incident, by the kind permission of the Messrs. Scribner. It will not fail to interest the people of Iowa, not only now, but in future times.

MR. E. L. SABIN has carefully prepared a statement of facts showing the part of "Iowa in the Mexican War." It was our intention to print that article in this number of *THE ANNALS*, but in the make-up of the last form it was unavoidably crowded out. It will be given in the January number.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.