

The Sod-Covered Schoolhouse

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

"The Sod-Covered Schoolhouse." *The Annals of Iowa* 7 (1907), 634-637.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.3364>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

as he saw them and his explanations or arguments in justification of his course in the various controversies he aroused and maintained during his gubernatorial career. In his collision with the Legislature, the practical outcome for him personally was discomfiture and defeat. The opposition was successful in securing a limitation of his powers by Congress. The political revolution in the country at large that took place in 1840 enabled his opponents to enforce his retirement. The public, judging simply by the contrary drifts of public sentiment, has not unnaturally concluded that our first governor was not only wrong, but was more than firm, pig-headed. It is fallacious, of course, to depend solely upon the printed or written records in measuring the faults or merits of political conduct because so much that is vital takes place *sub rosa*, or behind the curtains and in obscure recesses of which no record is made and hence correct interpretation *ex post facto* is exceedingly difficult. But an impartial study of Governor Lucas' letters and messages must convince one that he had solid ground in law, if not in fact, for his opposition to so many of the legislative bills presented to him. These letters in his own defense seem not to have been initial communications on his part, but in each case to have been written in response to official inquiry of his superiors at Washington. There is a fine dignity, and reserve of manner in his explanations, although his arguments and rejoinders are keen and his irony cutting at times. One cannot but think of the striking similarity in points of character and conduct, in the circumstances and experiences in the careers of Robert Lucas and Arthur St. Clair, the first Governor of the Northwest Territory. Both men were Scotchmen, and made of staunch stuff; both were firm to stubbornness in any course they deliberately undertook; both were conscientious and constant in carrying out both the letter and the spirit of the laws; both quickly ran counter to the ardent, insistent populace heedless or reckless of the law's injunctions, and both were finally worsted and ousted by the belligerent partizans they offended.

Drake University.

F. I. HERRIOTT.

THE SOD-COVERED SCHOOLHOUSE.

Mr. J. W. Ellis, Secretary and Treasurer of the Maquoketa Valley Pioneer Association, Secretary and Curator of the Jackson County Historical Society, sends the following communication about the old sod-covered building, the cut of which appears on another page.

By all odds the most important building erected in the then village of Springfield, later Maquoketa, was the sod-covered log house built by J. E. Goodenow and a Mr. Gowen for a blacksmith shop some time

in 1838. It was the first schoolhouse, the first blacksmith shop, and the first meeting house in what is now the city of Maquoketa.

This building first stood about where the Servatius store is now located on the east side of Main street and from the evidence of A. H. Wilson, A. J. Phillips and George Earl, who are still living here, was undoubtedly the third building erected in the village. It was built of unhewed logs, first covered with timbers split out of oak trees, and then covered with sod, it being the only sod-covered house ever erected in Maquoketa. Prior to 1842 it had no floor and but one small window, and was first used by Mr. Gowen for a blacksmith and general repair shop. Later two men, John and William Abbey, came to the village and built a shop and engaged in blacksmithing, and as the business was not extensive enough to afford two shops, Mr. Goodenow had an empty building on his hands, but not for long. In the spring of 1842 the population had so increased that a school was a much needed feature in the new settlement. Mr. Goodenow very generously offered to donate his building for a schoolhouse if those interested would assist in fitting it up for that purpose. His proposition was accepted and a floor was put in, also two windows, one on each side, made by cutting a section out of two logs near the middle and inserting the two parts of an 8 by 10-12 light window in such a way that one part of the sash would slip by the other in order to give ventilation. There was but one door in the building, it was made of plank ripped out with a whip-saw by hand, and was in the end facing the road near the southwest corner. The seats were made by splitting logs in halves, boring holes in the bark side and inserting pegs the proper length for legs, leaving the flat side up. These seats were 8 or 10 feet in length without back or foot rest, and would accommodate from 6 to 8 pupils each, according to size, if it could be called an accommodation. The desks on which the scholars practised writing were made by boring holes in logs the proper height from the floor and driving pegs into the logs, and fastening a wide, smooth plank on these pegs. The seats were arranged lengthwise about the room. When the pupils were studying their lessons they faced inward, and when time came for practicing writing, they reversed their positions and faced outward.

The first teacher was a Miss Dennison, a sister of Mrs. Sherwood who lived with her family on Section 10, South Fork township, or "over in the timber" as people would say in those days. Miss Dennison taught the spring term in 1842, Miss Catherine Earl taught the second term, and Ebenezer Dorr, who later married Miss Earl, taught the winter term. The first pupils of the first school taught in Maquoketa were Sophia, Laura and John Shaw; Serena, Nancy, Bolivar, Margaret and A. J. Phillips; Mary, Julia and Phebe M'Cloy; Mary, Sarah and Hubert Pangborn; Sarah Wright, a half-sister to Mrs. J. E. Goodenow; Columbus Billups; Henry and Charley Hall; Frank and Matilda Battles; Rhoda Effner, and George, Lizzie and Hattie Earl. Mary M'Cloy married Hon. Pierce Mitchell, one of our pioneer merchants. Phebe M'Cloy

married Fred Dunham; Julia M'Cloy died. Young Sarah Pangborn married Horace Salter, and she is now living in California. Mary Pangborn married Fred DeGrush, Hubert Pangborn died before reaching man's estate. Sophia Shaw married Judge Joseph Kelso, and still lives in Bellevue. Laura married John Broekschmit, and both are now living in Cedar Rapids. Helen Wright married Columbus Billups; she is dead, he is still living. Henry Hall married a Miss Smith. Nancy Phillips married Joel Higgins; both are dead. Serena married Alfred Clark, Bolivar married a woman in California, and A. J. married Elizabeth Springer. There might have been other pupils attending the first school taught in Maquoketa, but Mr. Phillips, from whom we have obtained most of this information, states that some of the first families only remained a short time and moved on to points farther west. Of the pupils of the old sod-covered schoolhouse of 1842, there are 10 or 12 known to be living, at this writing, but they are scattered over many states, most of them on the Pacific coast.

The first cabin in what is now the business section of Maquoketa, was built in the fall of 1837 by a Mr. Parmeter, and this cabin and the claim it stood on was sold to J. E. Goodenow in the spring of 1838. The next cabin was built by Nelson Brown, and stood where the Jackson County Bank now stands. James Sherman, a carpenter, built a small frame house in 1838 about where the First National Bank is located and in 1842 sold it to John Shaw who used it for a store building. The first store in the village was owned and operated by a man named Marr who came up from Nauvoo and after looking the field over, said he would put in a stock of merchandise if he had a building. Mr. Goodenow told him to go for his goods and the store room would be ready when he returned. Goodenow had a new corn crib which had not been used, and this he fixed up and put in shelving and when Marr returned with his stock of goods, the store room was ready for him. Mr. A. H. Wilson, who came here in April, 1839, is positive that Marr's was the first store started in the village of Maquoketa, or Springfield as it was then called.

Mr. Wilson is also positive that the cabin occupied by J. E. Goodenow, the Nelson Brown cabin, and the sod-covered cabin that Goodenow had built for a blacksmith shop, and the little frame coop, as it was called, were the only cabins in the village in 1839.

An item of history of which I had been entirely ignorant came out in a conversation with A. H. Wilson on the 4th of November, 1906, when he informed me that the first town site laid out in the Maquoketa valley, was made by Nelson Brown prior to 1839. That Brown had surveyed and platted a town site about where Dostal's brewery now stands, and had offered town lots for sale in the east before Mr. Goodenow had done any surveying for the present site of Maquoketa. Mr. Wilson recalls a visit he had with Brown in 1839. Brown had invited him to stay over night with him in his cabin in which he lived alone near the banks of the river. Mr. Wilson says when Brown started supper, he put

some water in a kettle and some coarse corn meal into the water and hung the kettle over the fire and then sat down to visit until the mush was cooked. Our old friend says it was the first time he ever saw mush made by putting the meal in cold water, but that it tasted very good with sweetened water.

Mr. Wilson states that the first preacher he remembers in the Maquoketa valley was Simeon Clark; other early day preachers were Rev. William Jenkins, Rev. Roberts and Rev. Weed, of whom Amasa Nims and his good wife thought so well that they named a son for him. Rev. William Jenkins settled in Perry township in 1839 and preached occasionally in the sod-covered log cabin, usually coming on horseback with a sheep skin for a saddle. Reverend William Salter preached here from 1843 to 1846, and has a very distinct recollection of the old sod-covered log house in which he first preached in the Maquoketa valley.

HALF BREED LANDS.

The farming lands in the Half Breed Tract, between the Mississippi and Des Moines Rivers, Wisconsin Territory, are now offered for sale, at the office of the Des Moines Land Company, at Montrose, (formerly Fort Des Moines) head of the Des Moines Rapids of the Mississippi River. The terms of payment are one-fourth cash at the time of sale, and the balance, half in two, and half in three years, with interest at six per cent per annum. There will be a public sale of Lots in the towns of Keokuk and Montrose, commencing at Keokuk, on Wednesday, September 6th, and closing at Montrose.

Persons with families, wishing to purchase lands and settle on the Half Breed tract, can be accommodated with rooms, or dwelling houses, and stabling for horses and cattle, at Montrose, without charge of rent, for a reasonable time, to erect buildings on such lands as they may purchase.

JOSEPH AIKEN,
ROBERT E. LITTLE,
Agents.

Office of the Des Moines Land Company.
Montrose, June 17th, 1837.

—*Montrose Western Adventurer*, August 19, 1837.

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.