

Letters of Joseph T. Fales

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LETTERS OF JOSEPH T. FALES

The following three letters written by Joseph T. Fales, pioneer resident of Dubuque, appeared in the *Du Buque Visitor* on October 19, November 9, 16, and December 7, 1836, and were addressed to friends still residing in his native state of Pennsylvania. The present day reader will recognize the wealth of information they contain, valuable to any one contemplating emigrating to the west in that pioneer period. The editor of the *Vistor* was more than glad of the opportunity of publishing these letters, because, he said, "the press of business" incident to the establishment of the first newspaper in Iowa had not allowed him time to answer the many inquiries he had received regarding the nature and the advantages of the village of Du Buque.

The writer, Joseph T. Fales, was a prominent figure in the Democratic political circles of his day, both in the city of Dubuque, and in the territory and state at large. He was at one time an Alderman of his city, and for several sessions, beginning with the first territorial assembly, he was Chief Clerk of the House of Representatives, being so regular in his position that one of the representatives, Laurel Summers, thought that a House of Representatives without Joseph T. Fales would be a barren looking affair indeed. Fales was also the first Auditor of State that Iowa had upon the establishment of state government, serving two terms from 1846-50. By that time he had removed to Linn County.

LETTER NO. I

(*Du Buque Vistor* November 16, 1836)

Du Buque, (W. T.) Sept. 1836

Dear Friends: According to a promise I made when I left you in Philadelphia last spring, I shall now attempt to give you some account of my journey to this place, and a feeble description of the far west; but a person sees so many things here in nature, of the sublime and beautiful, that he is lost in wonder and admiration.

My journey as far as Pittsburg, I shall not particularize, as it has been described so often, that it is quite familiar to the people in your good "city of brotherly love."

On the 6th of May, I took passage on a new boat, bound for St. Louis, this being her first trip, it was feared by many of her passengers, that she would not work very smoothly; but in this they were agreeably disappointed, she moved off in fine style, and pursued her way down the Ohio with little or no interruption. . . . On this noble river a person can perceive something of the rapid growth of our happy republic, if so blind that he has not observed it in the older states. A passenger observed, that towns seemed to spring up by magic; if a person traveled the river a few times, at only short intervals, he would find many towns that had grown up during his absence.

Our progress up the Mississippi was not quite so rapid, as we had to contend with the current of this "father of rivers," being then at its highest stage, overflowing all its banks. On the night of the 14th we arrived at St. Louis, and next morning took passage on the good boat Missouri Fulton, bound for this place, where we arrived on the 22d, being just three weeks from the time I left you; this is considered a quick passage. I suppose you will want to know something about our fare on the boats. Of this, I cannot speak in very flattering terms, when it is considered we had from 150 to 200 passengers, you will acknowledge we were crowded, and crowded we were to some purpose, and the weather excessively warm, you must know I took a deck passage. At this you may be surprised, but a deck passage on the western boats is not what you consider it to be at the east. The deck is enclosed from the weather, and births [sic] put up, on which the passengers put their own bedding, and a large stove is free to all to prepare their victuals. In this way, a person that lays in a stock of provisions at Pittsburgh, can travel very comfortable, at about half the expense of a cabin passage; it cost me \$35 dollars all the way through from Philadelphia to Du Buque. You know my destination was Galena, but I found that place so full, I could not get lodging or accommodation of any kind, and the streets so muddy, that I became disgusted with the place at

first sight, but with a better acquaintance I might like it more.

Du Buque stands upon the west bank of the Mississippi, opposite the north-west corner of the state of Illinois; it derives its name from a Frenchman, who lived and traded amongst the Indians, won their confidence, conciliated their affections, and was made a chief amongst them. He died in 1810, and was buried on the bluff a few miles below where the town now stands. Du Buque was first settled by whites, in June 1833, being the earliest period that they were allowed by government to come on this side of the river, after the Black-Hawk war, though they made many excursions contrary to law, previous to that time; but no buildings were erected, so that the town is but three years and four months old, yet you would be astonished to see the march of improvement in so short a space of time, where but a few short years ago, was the Indian wigwam and hunting ground, now may be seen on every hand, the fruits of civilization.

Du Buque, at this time, is thought to contain a population of 1200 souls, and amongst them are some of the most intelligent men I ever met with; though this, I believe, is a peculiar characteristic of all western people, which I cannot account for in any other way than, that all who travel are men of enterprise and in so new a country, all have been travelers. Some hundreds of houses have been erected, without much regard to comfort or convenience, but only for a temporary residence—but for this reason, a spirit of improvement is abroad. The catholics have nearly completed a large stone church; the Presbyterians are now erecting a commodious stone house; a large hotel is to be erected this fall by a company formed for the purpose, at a cost of about \$12,000, and many spacious and elegant private houses are being erected.

The town stands on elevated ground, a beautiful and commanding situation, with streets running at right angles 64 feet wide and 256 feet apart. Great exertions are being made by the citizens to have the seat of government located here, in fact it is the most eligible situation in the territory, being the centre of population, and the most geographical centre that can be obtained, that is any way suitable for the purpose.

The first legislature is to be chosen, this fall, who have to

locate the seat of government, and enact a code of laws for the future government of the people of Wisconsin. I feel much interested in the approaching canvas, as I am already a citizen, and have the privilege of exercising the elective franchise, as all naturalized males above 21 years, residents of the territory on the 4th of July last, are allowed that privilege.

The legislation of two, and possibly three states will receive their coloring from the action of the first legislature of Wisconsin, as the territory is said to be as large as the thirteen original states, consequently other states will soon be created within our present boundaries, therefore millions upon millions of human beings are soon to act their part on this vast domain. You desire to know something in regard to the mining business. Of this I cannot write from experience, as I have not 'prospected' any yet. The mineral is found imbedded in the bluffs, which are about three hundred feet above the level of the river. Holes are sunk in the ground similar to the digging of wells, and the rocks and dirt, drawn up by a windlass and rope, sometimes the miner meets with the solid rock, which he has to remove by blasting 20 or 30 feet, and mineral is found in the crevices of rocks at various distances from the surface, I believe, down to one hundred feet; it then runs in veins principally east and west, which is followed up by drifting, as the miners term it, under ground 80 or 100 feet more. Those that are so fortunate as to strike a good lead, (pronounced leed) can raise several hundred dollars worth per week, whilst others have dug many months and found nothing. The great secret appears to be in getting over a crevice. The mineral is in large masses, or lumps; I have seen some that weighed above 300 lbs. The price now is 25 dollars per 1000 lbs. and taken away by the smelters, who run it into moulds, and sell for about 5 dollars per 100 lbs. This place has gained its importance from the lead business—most of the people here have been engaged in it previous to this season; but many have now turned their attention to farming. This is the best soil for that purpose I ever saw. Produce is now very high, in consequence of every thing being brought from St. Louis and that vicinity. Groceries and dry goods are nearly double the Philadelphia prices, but wages are also high,

so that one will regulate the other. Masons get \$2 50 and \$3 00 per day, carpenters \$2 00 and \$2 50, laboring men \$1 50. The best business, or the surest one in this country, I think is that of farming. It is only necessary for you to go out a few miles from town and make a selection of the best of land the sun ever shone upon for your farm, build your house, and make your fence, plough your ground, and live unmolested, as it regards payment, for perhaps 2 or 3 years; then you will have a farm of 160 acres, worth several thousand dollars, for which you will have to pay but \$200. Horses are very little used, except under the saddle. Most of the work is done by oxen, which are noble looking animals, fully as large and fat as some of the show beef in the east. But I find I am rambling to an extent I did not intend in this letter, I must reserve something for another time.

Yours &c

J. T. F.

LETTER NO. II

(*Du Buque Vistor, October 19, November 9, 1836*)

Du Buque, 15th Oct. 1836

Dear Sir—Yours of the 8th ult. was duly received; I embrace the first leisure moment to answer your inquiries. Du Buque, the largest and most thriving town in the new Territory of Wisconsin, is situated on the west bank of the Mississippi, 1700 miles from the sea, or Gulf of Mexico, near 1600 miles from New Orleans, and 400 above St. Louis. It is in latitude $42\frac{1}{2}^{\circ}$ north and longitude 14° west from Washington. It is a little north of Boston, though the climate is colder here than in the same parallel in the eastern states. It is built upon a sandy prairie, which extends along the river about two miles, and averages about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile in width. The ascent is gradual from the margin of the river to the bluff, which arises abruptly and almost perpendicularly on the west of the town, to the highth [sic] of 200 feet, but gradually falls off as it extends northwardly, into gentle undulations. The river from the bluff is most enchanting; the eye rests upon it with untiring

delight. On the west is a wide extended rolling prairie, carpeted with green and enamelled with flowers, interspersed with groves of timber. On the south, the river can be seen rolling its vast tide studded with islands and enlivened by steam boats; on the north, an extended champaign country stretching as far as the sight can reach. Immediately opposite the town, several islands forming a kind of chain obstruct the navigation; a portion of the Mississippi passing between these islands and the main land called by the inhabitants the slough, (slue) forms a channel through which steam boats come to the town. This slough is navigable the greater part of the year, to the northern extremity of the town, but at a low stage of water, boats unload at the south end. It is about three years since the Indian wigwam gave place to the American cabin. The village now contains 1300 inhabitants, three churches, fifty stores and groceries, supplied with almost every article of necessity or comfort; boarding houses, work shops, &c. &c. We have not enough taverns and houses of entertainment for the accommodation of those who visit us. A company was formed this summer for the purpose of erecting a large hotel. There have been 55 dwelling houses and one ware house built and being erected this year. There are four principal streets and seven cross streets.

The average price of flour for the last two years has been \$8 per bbl., at present it is higher; mess pork \$25 to \$30 per bbl., prime \$18 to \$22, army \$23; beef 6 to 7 cents per lb. This article we have of the finest quality, inferior to none. Corn 87½ to \$1.25 per bushel; oats 75 cts, to \$1; potatoes 50 cts. to \$1; butter from 25 to 50 cents per lb; eggs 25 to 75 cents per dozen. Provisions of all kinds have usually commanded the highest prices, because the farming interest has not kept pace with the mining operations. At first all who came to the country engaged in digging for lead ore, and until the present year there were but few agriculturists; it will be several years yet before enough will be raised for home consumption, and if emigration increases proportionately, it will be still longer. Building materials are scarce and high; this will be remedied as soon as more mills are put in operation—we have timber enough on the river, but the demand

hitherto, has exceeded the supply. Pine boards of an inferior quality sell at \$30 per thousand feet, oak, \$20;—brick, \$10 per thousand; shingles \$6 per thousand. Clay in this vicinity is pronounced to be of the very finest quality for brick making, and no doubt it will supercede any other material for building. Stone is very abundant, but of medium quality—the bluffs abound with it, and it may be said to be at our very door. It is quarried from the bluff and precipitated down its steep, from whence it is removed by a short caraige [sic] to any part of the town. Lime is plenty and cheap, in proportion to other things. Wages are good—mechanics have from 2 to \$3 per day—laborers \$1 25 to \$1 50, or when employed by the month, from \$20 to \$40. There are few mechanics who work as journeymen, all undertake, as most of the buildings now are small.

[The letter was continued in the November 9th issue of the *Du Buque Visitor*. This portion was largely composed of extensive quotations from Lt. Albert Miller Lea's *Notes on Wisconsin Territory and a Map*. The concluding paragraph of the letter, following the quotations from Lea, is given below.]

Some idea of the mining operations in the neighborhood of Du Buque may be formed from the fact that there are five blast furnaces that smelt seventy pigs each per week; one blast belonging to Mr. Hulett that smelts 70,000 lbs. per week; a cupola furnace of Mr. McKnight's that smelts 70,000 lbs. per week—another belonging to Mr. Lorimier of Rip Row that smelts 60,000 per week, and several log furnaces that melts 70 pigs of 70 lbs. each. Mr. O'Ferrall's furnace is 70 feet by 33 has lately gone into operation, and smelts 100,000 lbs. per week. For the supply of the miners, and indeed of almost the whole population, we have been dependent for almost everything upon the low country, and it will be long ere the competition in farming can render this country otherwise than exceedingly profitable to the agriculturist. We have five saw mills and two grists in our neighborhood, but the demand is greater than can be supplied.

[Here the letter ends, though no signature is appended. This letter was the first of the three published, though the second written.]

LETTER NO. III

(*Du Buque Visitor*, December 7, 1836)

Du Buque, November 16, 1836

Dear Friends I will now proceed to give you a further description of this vast and important country, or attempt to do so, in my feeble manner. You are well aware, that I am out of my element, writing being a new business to me, therefore you can account for the blundering way in which these letters are put together.

In the first place, I intend to say a few words to the ladies, or more particularly, to those who are holding on in the "state of single blessedness." If they wish to change for "better or for worse," let them wend their way to the west side of the Mississippi, and they will not be disappointed in getting a husband at the shortest notice. Men are as numerous here as black berries in summer, but females are quite scarce—this fact is quite observable in the houses of public worship, where there are five males in attendance to one female. In this country, females receive from 16 to 24 dollars per month for house work, and are hard to be got at that price. If some hundreds of the fair sex in the old states could be induced to come this way, they would soon have an opportunity to make a change, no doubt to their entire satisfaction.

There is a great deficiency here in many of the mechanic branches, some of which I will just enumerate—cabinet makers, chair makers, brick makers, and brick layers, shoe-makers, tinsmiths, tanners and curriers, soap and candle makers, potters, weavers, wheel-wrights, coopers, &c, all of which could find constant and profitable employment.

I will also give you, as near as possible, the prices of articles manufactured by the above mechanics, as I know them to exist, and if I have given what you would consider very high prices, it is not to deter persons from coming here, but on the contrary to show to mechanics and the laboring classes generally in the

east what they can obtain for their work in this most interesting of all lands, the new Wisconsin Territory. Low-post bedsteads cost \$10, walnut breakfast tables the same, Windsor chairs \$9 the half dozen, and other furniture in proportion; bricks \$10 per 1000, laying the same \$3; soap $12\frac{1}{2}$ cts to $16\frac{2}{3}$ per lb.; dipt candles $18\frac{3}{4}$ cents, whilst tallow cost but $6\frac{1}{4}$ cts. per lb.; common sized tubs \$2, buckets 75 cents; open wagons from \$90 to \$100, wheelbarrows \$12.

Rents are high at present, but this is owing to the rapid and almost unparalleled increase of population, far outstripping the means to erect buildings heretofore. At this time several saw mills are in successful operation and many others being erected, also several grist mills.

A very comfortable log house can be put up for about \$150, which will suit very well for a temporary residence, or until a man with a small capital is enabled to put up a more costly and handsome dwelling.

Since I penned my last letter, the first territorial election has been held, one delegate to Congress was elected, also thirteen councilmen, and twenty-six representatives to compose the legislative assembly of Wisconsin, which is now in session.

Some idea may be formed of the prosperity of the place from the fact that 621 votes were polled in this town alone, and near 1000 in the county. Decency and good order prevailed to a greater degree than it has been my lot to witness in other places for several years back. There was no tumult or party strife to exasperate and excite the feelings, but every voter was allowed free access to the polls, and all passed off in the utmost harmony.

The season for game has just passed, some kinds of which have been in great abundance, consisting of deer, wild geese, and ducks, pheasants and prairie fowls, the latter is the most delicious of the feathered tribe. I had heard much, previous to my coming here, of the coldness of the climate, the long and dreary winters, but up to this time, (the middle of November), with the exception of four or five days, the weather has been the most pleasant and agreeable, and no colder than is usual in Pennsylvania, at the same season. There is very little

snow falls, and the winters are generally dry and healthy, and business continues unabated, except upon the rivers, which are obstructed by ice about three months. We have one drawback upon the general convenience of our town. Either from the difficulty in digging wells, or the supineness of the inhabitants on the subject, there have been but three or four wells dug, so that most of the water used is taken from the Mississippi and served round by Wm. Miller, a young Philadelphian, and a profitable business he makes of it.

Now, once for all, I give my advice to persons in the eastern states, who are toiling from year to year and saving nothing, to bend their course to the west as soon as possible, and they will find a change for the better very shortly. If they come with a disposition to be pleased, and not with a fault-finding spirit, make up their minds to be satisfied with things as they find them, and turn their hands to any thing that offers, they could not be prevailed upon to exchange for their former situations. All that come so disposed, will find a hearty welcome from the citizens, and every encouragement will be given to make them happy and contented.

Yours, &c.

J. T. F.

PUBLIC MEETING

A meeting of the citizens of Du Buque county, will be held at Harrison's Hotel, on Tuesday evening next, to consult and adopt measures for the disposition of a sum of money left in the hands of a citizen of this place, as belonging to a man arrested for passing counterfeit money, as security for his appearance and he having failed to appear, the money is forfeited. A general attendance is requested.

DU BUQUE

Dubuque Visitor, June 1, 1836.

In 1836 there were 350 lives lost by steamboat accidents, in 1837, about 700, and the number thus far in 1838 falls little short of 1000.

Albany Jeffersonian, Albany, New York, July 21, 1838.

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