

General Kearny and Iowa

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ANNALS OF IOWA

EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT

GENERAL KEARNY AND IOWA

Stephen W. Kearny did not leave much of an impress upon Iowa; but he certainly saw the country in its primitive simplicity, and it was very proper that on July 4, 1944, a new state park was given his name. This is the park adjacent to the city of Emmetsburg, on the shore of Medium lake, which was re-named Five Island lake. The Historical department did a little boosting for adoption of the name as a memorial to a distinguished American officer of dragoons who twice crossed Iowa when the buffalo were abundant. General Kearny trod the heavy upland grass of the Des Moines river valley almost from end to end. He must have been of rather short vision, because he advised against planting a military post at the Raccoon forks, on the ground that it was too far out in the Indian country. But he proved that a company of dragoons could go almost anywhere in the vast region between the two big rivers.

It was Stephen W. Kearny, then a captain of dragoons, who led a military scouting party from a temporary military camp on the Missouri river to the upper Mississippi valley, camping at or near where the new Kearny state park is now marked. It is true his Indian guide lost the way, but the lakes and swamps were passed, and the big herds of buffalo gave up meat for the camp fires. That first trip was in 1820, and the same interpid captain of dragoons made another trip up the Des Moines valley and back again fifteen years later.

It was later that Kearny got his orders to go to the Pacific coast and take over from Mexico the area that became California, and for a short time serving as its governor. It is his far western exploits that are best known. But he did have a great deal to do with Iowa.

He was stationed at Fort Des Moines I, on the Mississippi river, and was an associate of Capt. Nathan Boone, Capt. James Allen and others. It was the United States dragoons that opened up central Iowa for the homesteaders. The Black Hawk war had given the white adventurers a toe-hold along the river. When the Des Moines valley was opened, then began the great rush to make Iowa what it is. Kearny had a hand in this before he struck across the Rocky mountains.

Capt. Nathan Boone was of a piece with the great Daniel, and he fairly lived the free life of the frontier. No one was more familiar than he with the rich central valley of the state. A prosperous county bears his name and the trusty rifle of Daniel Boone (with its fifteen notches for fifteen Indians) is seen by many of the visitors to the magnificent state museum of the state of Iowa.

In this centennial period of Iowa it is good to be reminded of these stirring incidents and strong men of the long ago. There is much of romance in Iowa history.

In 1834, Col. Stephen W. Kearny brought to Camp Des Moines, later Fort Des Moines, at Montrose, Iowa, a woman slave servant, who remained in his household as long as they remained at the fort. At that time, as stated by Gen. George W. Jones, the territorial delegate for Michigan territory, to which the Iowa district was nominally attached, the people of western Wisconsin (Iowa) "are now and have ever been, without the pale of judicial tribunals." It remained for the Iowa territorial court to declare that slavery could not be tolerated in Iowa.

Opposition to Des Moines as location for the state capital lingered long. In 1868, M. E. Cutts and John F. Lacey were candidates for members of the legislature on declared opposition to "the state house project", or proposed erection of the state capitol at the seat of government.

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