



W. A. SCOTT

## WILLIAM ALEXANDER SCOTT

IN an unhonored grave, in a dreary, neglected spot in Des Moines, without stick or stone of any kind to commemorate his life or his public services and benefactions, lies the man who personally built and paid for the first State House in Des Moines, and who gave to the State of Iowa a part of the ground upon which now stands its present magnificent Capitol building.

In an early day, William Alexander Scott was a man of some influence and honored standing in Des Moines and Polk County. To-day only a few, the men who were pioneers with him, remember his name, even, and still fewer men know the disgraceful neglect that has made his last resting-place, on the bluff overlooking the Des Moines Valley, a shame to the public spirit and generosity of Des Moines.

His grave is located in a spot that would never be guessed as a human burial place. It lies just south of Vine Street, midway between East Eleventh and East Twelfth streets. Buildings have crowded around it on three sides—not sightly dwellings, but barns and outhouses; one outhouse stands within ten or fifteen feet of the grave. There is nothing now to mark his resting-place. Once there was a fence about the grave, placed there by a brother long since dead, but ruthless hands have torn it down, bit by bit, for one vandalistic reason or other. A year ago, there stood at the side of the grave a tree that was planted there by thoughtful hands, and which, through the years, had grown large enough to cast its protecting shade over the spot, but last Spring or Summer that, too, was ruthlessly cut down, and all that remains now to mark the grave is the shattered stump of that tree.

How did Scott come to be buried there? It is an interesting tale, and characteristic of the love the old pioneer felt for the Des Moines Valley. One day, years ago, when an old man, he was standing with some friends on the point of the bluff south of the

present Capitol, overlooking the grand view of the river valley and his fine farm on the plateau. He said, in a very impressive way: "When I die, I want to be buried here, where we stand."

In accordance with that desire, his body was brought here by his brother John, followed by a cortege of his loving friends and citizens, and there buried. The burial plat was purchased and deeded to Lee Township. A tree was planted, and for a time friends, now dead, maintained a cheap board fence about the grave. Now it is marked only by gross neglect, to the shame and ingratitude of the richest state in the Union, and of a people who profess a love of justice, of patriotism, of public spirit, and the exaltation of the righteous.

A pioneer of pioneers was William Alexander Scott, or "Aleck," as he was usually called. He came here in 1843, with the dragoons, and was given use of a section of land to cultivate for furnishing farm products for the garrison. He remained until the Indians were removed, when he went with them to Kansas as an Indian trader. When the military post was abandoned, and land entries were permitted, in 1846, he returned and purchased five hundred acres lying along the Des Moines River, comprising a large portion of what is now the East Side. He built a large double log house, a few hundred yards southeast of the present Soldiers' Monument, on the bottoms. A double log house consisted of two houses with an open space between equal to the length of each house, and covered with a roof for the shelter of wagons, plows, harness, etc., one house being used for a dwelling, the other for stabling.

The East Side, for some distance from the river, was covered with a dense thicket of underbrush, the principal occupants being rabbits.

One of the early questions to be solved by Scott and other pioneers was the river crossing. The center of population and business was at The Fort, and travel was in that direction. During a portion of the year, neither the Des Moines nor the 'Coon could be forded. For a time, skiffs and small boats were provided for ferrying of individuals, but teams had to be left on the farther side. In 1846, Scott put on a flatboat ferry and did a lucrative business, as emigrants moving west passed through here, the numbers increasing rapidly. During the California emigration, over six hundred

horses, and as many people, were ferried in a single day, and "Aleck," as everybody called him, charged stiff prices, as the travelers were generally well supplied with the lucre. It is related that on the day of the last session of the first Legislature in Des Moines, the Anti-Prohibition members had a jamboree, and about three o'clock in the morning came wobbling to the ferry. The ferry was closed, and they were informed that it would cost fifty cents a head to get across the river, whereat they demurred, raged and swore. Money was scarce, and some of the men had no fifty cents, but "Aleck's" demand was inexorable, and after some parleying, they raised the funds and were landed on the West Side.

Those ferries were a great convenience to the people, and aided very materially to increase the business and prosperity of The Fort.

Judge Williams, who held the first District Court in Polk County, and subsequently became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, used to tell a ferry story on himself to his friends. He was a jolly, sociable person, always ready for fun, a good story-teller, and enjoyed joking. He boarded on the East Side, and would get ferried over the river in a skiff rather than take "Aleck's" cumbersome craft. One day he wanted to get across, but there was no boy nor man in sight with a skiff. However, Mary Hayes, a buxom young woman, was washing clothes near the river. Accosting her, he asked: "Mary, how am I to get across the river?"

"Why, in the skiff, I suppose," she replied.

"But there is no one to bring back the skiff, and I am a very poor rower. Now, Mary, can't you take pity on a man in my predicament and row me over. I'll pay you in any number of kisses."

"Certainly, I'll take you over, but as to the kisses, Mr. Judge, I don't want any from such an old scrub as you."

"Oh, I suppose you have had a surfeit of them. Has Jim—"

"Now, look here, Judge, if you want to go across, get in, sit still, and be still."

The Judge got in, and was silent until they were well out in the river current, and Mary was pulling the oars like a sailor.

"Mary!"

"Sir?"

"Suppose I turn this boat downstream, and carry you off and marry you. Wouldn't that be delightful?"

Mary's eyes snapped with ire.

"You carry me off! You marry me! I wouldn't have such a dried-up old cracklin. I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth, and I couldn't get to heaven without a husband, and if you don't stop your nonsense, I'll pitch you into the river, and you can go as far as you please, but you don't take me with you."

The Judge used to tell the story among his friends with great enjoyment.

In 1847, "Aleck" was given a license by the County Commissioners to run a ferry across the Des Moines and 'Coon rivers, the seal of the Commissioners being affixed with a silver half dollar, the county having no official seal.

When the town of Fort Des Moines was organized, the Town Council concluded "Aleck" was making too much money with his ferries, and it was time the town got some benefit from them. A Ferry Committee was appointed, to devise ways and means therefore (sic). The ways were numerous, but the means were few. The Ferry Committee was instructed to provide a license for ferries, but "Aleck" claimed he had a perpetual commission to ferry from the old Indian chief, Keokuk, and the County Commissioners, having lost their jurisdiction, "Aleck" held on. The Council then ordered a foot bridge constructed, which the Ferry Committee sat down on. After a time, a compromise was made with "Aleck" to run a ferry over the Des Moines and 'Coon rivers, the doctors and mails to be carried free. After wrestling with the problem nearly two years, an agreement was made with "Aleck" to put in a float bridge at what is now Grand Avenue, then Sycamore on the West Side, and Keokuk on the East Side. It was serviceable only a portion of the year, for in high water it was too short, and in low water it was too long, making it difficult to get on or off from it. It was also a single track, and if teams met on it there was trouble, for one must back out, but it was a mighty good thing for the fishermen, and some of the fish caught from that bridge would surprise the fishers of to-day. The bridge was not a success, and "Aleck" kept right on with his ferry until 1856, when he built a trestle or arch bridge at Court Avenue, the first structural bridge over the river. It was weak in the joints and shaky, and in 1859 broke down.

In April, 1849, occurred what is known as the Fleming War. One Asa Fleming, a school teacher, son of a preacher, had taken a claim not far south of The Fort. A man named Perkins endeavored to preempt the claim—in fact, did file in the Land Office his intent to do so. Both were members of the County Claim Club, which was governed by the following rules:

“One.—We will protect all persons who may hold claims against the interference of any person or persons who shall attempt to deprive such claim holders of their rights by preemption or otherwise.

“Two.—We will, in all cases, discountenance the speculator or other person who shall attempt any innovation upon the homes of the rightful settlers; that we will not hold any fellowship with such person, and that he be regarded as a nuisance in the community.

“Three.—No person shall be allowed to preempt or purchase in any form from the Government any land which shall be held as a claim, unless he shall first obtain the consent of the claimant.

“Four.—The filing of an intention to preempt contrary to the rights of the settler shall be regarded as an attempt to wrongfully deprive the citizen of his home and his claim.

“Five.—It shall be the duty of the Committee [Standing] to notify any person who shall preempt or attempt to do so, by filing his intention to preempt, the claim of another person, to leave the vicinity and the county; and they have authority to enforce a compliance with said notice, and we will sustain the Committee in the discharge of all their duties.”

Adopted April Eighth, 1848.

One day Fleming saw Perkins hovering about his claim. He quickly gathered together some of his friends, and, armed with guns, started for vengeance. In those days, misdoers, claim-jumpers and horse thieves were disposed of by Judge Lynch.

Perkins learned that the posse was after him. He knew, as a Club member, what that meant, and quickly mounting a fleet horse, without coat or hat, fled to The Fort, barely escaping several shots sent after him. Eluding his pursuers, he reached the ferry in a perfect tremor of fright and fatigue, and begged “Aleck” to get him across the river quick, which was done. He went into obscurity

for several days, and after recovering from his fright, became valorous, and procured a warrant for the arrest of Fleming, on a charge of attempt to murder. Fleming was arrested and brought before Esquire Luce. His friends quickly rallied for his defense, and while the court was getting ready for business, swooped down on the crowd, seized Fleming, and carried him away. He was soon after re-arrested and brought to The Fort, when his friends—eighty of them—again rallied, armed and equipped for another rescue. Arriving at the ferry, they demanded immediate crossing, but “Aleck” hesitated, he didn’t seem to be in any haste, when he was told that if he did not take them across, they would shoot up the whole town. They threatened and cursed him in several languages, but he didn’t scare. While this disturbance was going on, The Fort had got stirred up. Coroner Phillips, full of *spiritus frumenti*, declared Martial Law, and ordered all stores and business places closed, which gave the West Siders acceptable opportunity to turn out and see the scrimmage.

“Aleck” was obdurate. He told the mob that not a man could cross the river until all guns were stacked and weapons laid aside. Very sullenly they finally surrendered, and were taken over to the West Side, which, under Phillips’ Martial Law, was quiet and in good order to receive them. Fleming was duly examined, the charges against him were sustained, and he was bound over to the Grand Jury, but was released on giving an appearance bond. The Grand Jury did not indict him. In the meantime, public sentiment had rendered Perkins quite unpopular. Legal proceedings were had against him, and he gave a bond to let Fleming alone, but he always claimed that Fleming’s claim covered more land than he was entitled to, and it was only the excess he was trying to get, but Fleming’s father being a Methodist preacher, and the settlement nearly all Methodists, they joined together against him.

There was a man named Holland, a land speculator, who, it was rumored, furnished Perkins the money to preempt Fleming’s claim, and thereupon a Vigilance Committee of about thirty, well armed, surrounded his house one day and ordered him to come out, which he quietly did, assuring the crowd that he was ready to meet his doom, but requested the privilege of making some remarks, which

was granted. He was a good talker, and so forcibly and eloquently appealed to the crowd with his defense, that it relaxed its vengeance into a broad smile, shook hands with him, and, at his request, went to the corner "grocery" to quench its thirst for gore with corn juice, and thus ended the famous Fleming War.

In 1849, Scott had his land platted and annexed it to "East Des Moines." He built several dwellings and a large brick house near what is now the east end of the Rock Island Railroad bridge, which, for several years, was known as the Scott House, later the Slatten and the Hawkeye, and still later, the Refuge of Sin and Prostitution, until it was torn down soon after the railroad was completed.

Immediately after the Seat of Government was located here, public attention became aroused respecting the location of the State House. Both sides of the river were ambitious and eager to secure it. In 1855, Scott, A. M. Lyon, and a few others formed an Association to get the location on the East Side. Citizens outside of the Association also joined in the project, and a large number of town lots were put into a sort of pool as a bonus to influence a decision of the State Commissioners in the location. Scott's Association offered to give forty acres of land—nearly all of which was owned by Scott—and to build a State House. The West Siders offered the necessary land and about three hundred thousand dollars as a bonus to the state. Then ensued one of the most exciting contests known in the history of the town, and in which was engendered strife and animosities which have not yet been obliterated.

In that contest, Scott was the victim of unscrupulous speculators, through his innate honesty, and over-weening faith in Humanity. He executed his agreement to the very letter, at a great loss to himself, carried the first State House to completion, donated the site for it, and also most of that on which the State House now stands, though then quite unlike what it now is. It was covered with forest trees and underbrush so dense that several women once got lost in attempting to go through it, causing considerable alarm to friends for several hours. On the west and south sides, it was twenty feet above the present elevation.

When the State House deal was over, Scott had little left.



When the Legislature convened at its first session in Des Moines, Scott gave a very elaborate reception in his new brick hotel to the members and state officers, and he was the observed of all observers as "the man who built the State House." It was a very popular hostelry with legislators and lawyers.

Politically, Scott was a Democrat, but not a politician. In 1857, at the urgent request of friends relying on his popularity, he ran for Representative to the first Legislature held in Des Moines, against "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell, and, while he carried Lee Township by a vote of one hundred and sixty to one hundred and fifty-four, he was defeated by a vote of one thousand and eighty to eight hundred and ninety-four, in the county. At this session, a law was passed providing for the placing of draws in all bridges over the Des Moines River, from its junction with the 'Coon to its mouth, thus practically declaring the river above Des Moines an unnavigable stream. In 1860, some difficulty arose over Scott's bridge, as an obstruction to navigation, and an Act was passed providing that so much of the Law of 1857-8 which provided for draws in bridges, and declaring the river not navigable above Scott's bridge, be repealed, but the multiplicity of bridges within the city evidences little regard for the repeal, and navigation above The Forks is not a disturbing question.

Scott married a very intelligent Indian woman, who was a good wife, but she had an appetite for "fire-water," and periodically would lock herself in a room, put on a full Indian dress, and have a spree for a week, when she would resume her wifely duties in a very proper manner.

"Aleck" was a big-hearted man, with liberal impulses, and generous to a fault. He lacked fortitude to resist a solicitation for aid or accommodation. He indorsed the obligations of others, which he had to pay, and to do which he encumbered his property with mortgages. The wide-spread financial depression caused by the panic of 1856-7 cut off all sources of recovery from his embarrassment, and with hope that fortune would favor him and enable him to redeem and save his property, he started for Pike's Peak, but when crossing the plains was taken ill and died in a tent, June Twenty-third, 1859.

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by L. F. Andrews

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