

## WILLIAM F. AYERS

ONE of the earliest settlers at The Fort was William F. Ayers, who came in 1845, when the soldiers were here. He was a tailor and made clothing for the troopers and early settlers. Judge Casady and Barlow Granger say he made better clothing than can be got nowadays. It may not have been quite up to the Paris fashions, but it was made to wear, and was equal to the fashion of the pioneers.

At the county organization election, on April Sixth, 1846, he was elected County Treasurer, to serve until the regular election in August following. The treasury was not overburdened at that time. It abounded largely in expectations. The county officials got no pay for services, for there was no revenue except the fees for licenses to keep a grocery, and the sale of lots, a settlement of which was made in October, when it was found there was \$2,233.59 in the treasury, of which one hundred and forty-five dollars was allowed as expenses for surveying and platting the original town. The taxes assessed that year for the entire county amounted to three hundred and fourteen dollars and fourteen cents. One man, G. B. Clark, made the assessment for the whole county, for which he was allowed thirty dollars.

At that April election, three County Commissioners were elected—W. H. Meacham, Benjamin Saylor, and E. W. Fouts—who had control of all county affairs. At the second meeting of the Commissioners, in May, they took dinner with Ayers—there were no taverns, and they “boarded around,” as it were. During the dinner hour, they discussed county affairs. The garrison was then known as Fort Raccoon, a name they did not like; it was not dignified enough for a town that would be the capital of the state. It would be called “Coontown,” and its people “Coons.” They decided to change it to Fort Des Moines, after the larger and more pretentious river, and it was so ordered.

During the year 1845, it became quite certain the Capital would be removed to a more central point in the state. Speculation at once arose as to the probable location. Polk County and Fort Des Moines were ambitious, and there were others. J. B. Saylor, an active, influential man, had started a town about four miles up Des Moines River, which he was booming briskly. It bid fair to out-rank The Fort, and to this he added the very forceful claim that it was the nearest the center of the county—that The Fort was away off on one side, an argument that could not be abjured. Ayers, wide awake to public affairs and politics, decided to take a hand in the game. He went to Oskaloosa, got a surveyor to come and make measurements, who found The Fort to be about four miles south and east of the county center. Something must be done. The possibility of Saylorville must be put beyond peradventure. Judge Casady, who represented the county in the Legislature, was appealed to. He promptly responded by preparing a bill to set off a tier of townships from Jasper County on the east, and also from what was to be Warren County on the south, and attach them to Polk County. Ayers gathered several friends one day into his lumber wagon and took them to Iowa City to help the Judge. It was in mid-Winter, the temperature below zero, and it was a trip requiring fortitude and public spirit. The bill passed, the county was "squared," The Fort was made the "Seat of Justice." The sequestration of the strips from Jasper and Warren having served its purpose, they were, with legislative magnanimity, returned to their original place, and The Fort went on her way rejoicing.

While this movement was going on, William McKay, a lawyer, who subsequently became a Judge, received a tip from Iowa City that The Fort would be selected as the Seat of Government. He took Ayers into his confidence, who at once made a claim for one hundred and sixty acres lying west of Eighth Street and south of Sycamore (now Grand Avenue), which he was to divide with McKay. He went one night, during a severe rainstorm, to blaze the trees and set the stakes on the lines of his claim. Perry Crossman, the first County Clerk, disputed the claim, but Ayers cut some logs from the timber further west and hauled them to the spot

selected for his cabin, about where Teachout's icemaking plant is. The following night, Crossman's men came and cut up the logs. Ayers hauled more logs, put up a tent, and placed his son, Guy, a robust lad of sixteen years, who is still on duty in the city, to guard it. His only weapon was a hatchet. Crossman's men again appeared and pulled down the tent, when Guy, with hatchet in hand, declared that the first man who touched a log would get the hatchet. One fellow, with a sneer at the boy's bravado, seized a log, and he got the hatchet in his thigh, whereupon the gang retired. Crossman then sold his claim rights to James Campbell, a well-known doctor in the early days. During the contention, the Old Settlers' Association took a part, for conciliatory purposes, and a compromise was made by which Campbell and Ayers each took eighty acres. Ayers then sold to Doctor P. B. Fagen two acres of his claim near Eighth and Mulberry streets, on which he erected a two-story frame dwelling-house, facing south, and it is there now. Ayers fenced, with rails split from the cabin logs, twenty acres, and planted them with corn. Subsequently, after dividing with McKay, he sold his claim rights to Doctor Fagen for nine hundred dollars, and entered at the Government Land Office fifty acres, which included Horseshoe Lake, on the bottoms along 'Coon River, a spot which subsequently became historic.

The second, really the first, County Agricultural Fair was held thereon, in October, 1853. For several years, it was used for annual Fairs of the Polk County Association and the Central Iowa District Association, but subsequently passed to the Des Moines Driving Park Association, who purchased seventy acres surrounding the lake and along the river and fitted them up with a splendid half-mile track, amphitheater, floral, fine art and agricultural halls, skating rink, buildings, stands, stalls, dwellings, barns, etc., and for many years it was the favorite resort for fairs, cattle and horse shows, picnics, and other social events. The noted trotting stallion, Rarus, once gave an exhibit of his then wonderful speed against time in the presence of an immense crowd. His stride of twenty-two feet forced him to keep the outside of the track clear around the course. The track was in fine condition, and he beat his record on a half-mile track. Floods and high water finally caused its

abandonment, and now the Chicago Great Western Railroad, and the city dump, have buried in oblivion what was once a beautiful place.

In 1847, Ayers was active in organizing what became the Old Settlers' Claim Club, whose regulations embodied the idea of giving every man a fair deal. There then being no form of local government in existence, the old settlers resolved to become a law unto themselves, for protection against claim jumpers, horse thieves, and land grabbers, and they governed wisely and well.

In 1848, with the nine hundred dollars raised from Fagen, Ayers purchased seven hundred and twenty acres in Jefferson Township, which he greatly improved, and which has been known for many years as "Ayers' Grove."

In 1855, Ayers built his first house. It was a two-story frame, and formed a part of what is now the Benedict Home, which was built around it.

In the Fall of 1855, he bought the Griffith & Stanton sawmill, on the East Side, and moved it to the west side of Des Moines River at the foot of North Street (now University Avenue), he owning timber land along the river. It was the first steam circular sawmill in the town. Its capacity was four thousand feet per day. The logs were cut along the river and floated to the mill. Sometimes the rafts reached as far as Thompson's Bend. Black Walnut lumber was worth three dollars per hundred feet, and a dollar and a quarter in the log at the mill.

In 1856, in the contest between the East and West Side over the location of the State House, Ayers was a West Sider. He deemed it nonsense to put the Capitol "away off in the country, in the woods," and he affirmed his conviction by subscribing five thousand dollars to the fund to secure its location on the West Side, but the East Siders had something more tangible than paper promises to give the locating Commissioners, and got the prize. It was a big "scoop."

In 1856, Scribner & Farnham had a portable steam sawmill south of Market Square, on the bottoms, near the 'Coon. The logs were cut on the elevation, and rolled down to the mill.

In 1856, Ayers, with his son Guy, built a large steam flour mill, where now is the power house of the Edison Light Company. The

boiler and all machinery were brought from Mount Vernon, Ohio. Its capacity was three hundred bushels of wheat per day. It cost sixteen thousand dollars. The coal used for fuel was tunneled out from the bluffs along the river.

When the mill was ready for business, Guy went over the county for wheat. The first contract he made was with a widow named Boone, for four hundred bushels for future delivery, at one dollar per bushel in gold. She refused to make a written agreement, saying her word was good enough. Before the season closed, Guy paid two dollars per bushel, but the widow delivered her wheat as she agreed. That was the way old settlers did business—they had faith in one another.

In 1857 came the hard times. The country was flooded with notes of "wild-cat," rotten banks. Gold was scarce. There was no silver. Bankruptcy threatened every business. Lot owners could not sell enough to pay their taxes. All building stopped. The best walnut lumber could not be sold at any price. On the mill property was a mortgage drawing interest at two per cent a month. The panic forced a foreclosure of it, with great loss to Ayers, and soon after the mill was destroyed by fire.

Religiously, Ayers was an Episcopalian. He was one of the vestrymen of the First Episcopal Church, and held the place many years.

Politically, he was a Whig, and ardent supporter of John C. Fremont for President, but during the Kansas Free State contest, was opposed to the John Brown-negro-underground-emigration scheme, and took no part in it. Though an active politician, he was not a place-seeker, the first county treasurership being the only public office he held.

He was a true type of the pioneer of that day. Of kindly, genial impulses, honest, public-spirited and progressive, he was prominent in public affairs during the formative period of the county and town. He died in January, 1867.

April Ninth, 1905.

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**by L. F. Andrews**

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