



JOHN M. DAVIS

JOHN M. DAVIS

Living over on the East Side, very quietly, on Easy Street, undisturbed by the price of flour, corn meal, potatoes, the uncertainty of Packingtown products, or the tax collector, in a house which was built on the installment plan, when there wasn't lumber enough to build a house complete, can be found John M. Davis, an old-timer, who made his advent to the town with the archives of the state, when they were removed from Iowa City, in 1857, which was an important epoch in the history of the town and county.

Born in Ohio, John, in 1854, got the Western fever, went down the Ohio River, up the Wabash, thence by stage coach to Iowa City, where he entered the service of George McCleary, Secretary of State, as his Deputy. There he remained until the expiration of McCleary's term, in 1856, and also of his successors, Elijah Sells, in 1863, and Doctor James Wright, in 1867, when he became the Deputy of the Register of the State Land Office, where he remained—except one year—until the office was abolished, in 1883, as a separate department of the Government, but he was retained as Chief Clerk in the office until 1891. During all these years, he was considered and accepted as the main spoke in the wheel of the Government machine. During his service in the Land Office, the business was immense, requiring the most expert management.

In November, 1857, orders were given to remove the archives of the state to Des Moines. It was a big job. There were all the records of the offices of the Secretary, Treasurer, Auditor, and Superintendent of Public Instruction, and four large safes with their contents. There were no railroads, the route a wide expanse of unbroken country, some of the roads mere blind trails, and streams with no bridges.

It fell to the lot of John to do the packing of the contents of the Secretary's office, which, causing him the most concern, was the returns of the October

election of Governor and Lieutenant Governor, it being the first election of a Lieutenant Governor in the state. The returns were sent in sealed envelopes from the several counties, to be delivered to the Speaker of the House on the assembling of the Legislature, in January. They had not all been received, and John did not want to take any risk in their getting lost or mislaid, so, in accordance with the old adage that "one move is as bad as a fire," he put the returns in his trunk with his clothing and sat on the lid.

Martin L. Morris, a Des Moines man, for many years an associate editor of the Democratic papers of that day, as Treasurer and Custodian of State Property, contracted with a man named Bowen to haul the contents of the four offices to Des Moines. The roads were bad, and progress was slow. On reaching Four Mile Creek, a severe storm of wind and snow arose, rendering further movement of the big treasury safe impossible. It was dumped overboard, to wait the abatement of the storm. It contained a large amount of money, but there was little or no danger of burglary. It was provided with a good combination tumbler lock, and only the Treasurer and his Deputy knew the combination, but the boys were interested in its arrival, for the payment of their preceding month's salary depended on it. The Secretary's safe, a smaller one, also had a similar lock, the combination of which John carried in his head.

After the storm was over, a team of ten yoke of oxen and a big bobsled was made up in town, and the safe hauled to the State House through mud and slush, the snow having melted.

Colonel Hooker, Superintendent of the Great Western Stage Company, proffered the four state officers free transportation. It was his special pride to "do things" on occasions, and early on a clear, cold Friday morning, November Sixth, 1857, he ordered out the best coach at the station, four fine horses, and put "Joe" Baggs on the box, with instructions to "get there on time." "Joe" was the oldest and best reinsman on the line, and known from Iowa City to Omaha.

With a relay of fresh horses every ten miles, the trip was made nicely, despite a severe snowstorm, and about noon on Saturday, "Joe" pulled into

Des Moines, crossed Des Moines River on a pontoon bridge, and rolled up to the Demoin House, which stood where the new Postoffice is to be, his horses puffing like a jack-rabbit with a hound behind him, his passengers jovial, and hungry, but soon satisfied by the sumptuous spread Colonel Spofford, noted for such things, laid before them.

With the deputies and clerks, it was different. Treasurer Morris hired a "jerkey," put in it the six fellows, "Dave" Sells, "Dan" Warren, "Tom" and "Bill" Kinsey, George Matthews, and John, with their baggage. It pulled out immediately after the stage coach left. The first day, they reached Brooklyn. The next day, they were buffeted with wind and snow, so that they got only within about twenty-five miles of Des Moines, when the driver pulled up. The next morning, the snow was so deep the roads were entirely obliterated, and the driver refused to go on, as he did not know the way, and would take no risks—getting lost on a trackless prairie was a thing to be considered in those days. Then it was up to the boys. They hunted up a farmer who knew the road to Des Moines, "day or night," piled themselves on his farm wagon, with their trunks for seats, John sitting on his own, "Tom" Kinsey used to say, to be sure those election returns didn't get away from him, and about four o'clock on Sunday were landed at the brick boarding-house kept by Doctor Shaw, which stood where Father Nugent's Catholic Church now is, jolted, bumped, and hungry. The Doctor quickly satisfied the cravings of their vacant stomachs.

Monday morning, they were ready for business. Harking back to that day, John says the outlook was dubious. The State House was not ready for them, and the Legislature coming soon after. Carpenters and laborers were rushing around, and chaos everywhere. Boxes and bundles heaped high, with no place to put their contents. Looking out over the surroundings, the scene, compared with the pleasant environments they had left in Iowa City, the prospect was not very "happyfying." The State House, built in the woods and brush, east and south of it heavy timber, in which squirrels, quail, and grouse revelled, and in the early Spring only the Hoot Owl and plaintive song of the Whip-poor-will broke the silence of the desolation. Between the State

House and the river, but a few primitive buildings; not a street leading thereto was little more than a trail; not a sidewalk; the soft, black soil, when wet, sticky, slippery, and nearly impassable, often covered with water, and passable only in boats. Where the present Capitol now stands was a forest; farther east of it, what is now Franklin Park, was a pond, dotted thick with the houses of Muskrats. The only consolation to the new-comers was the cordial welcome and kind treatment of the residents.

John was retained as Deputy Secretary of State thirteen years, though in the Summer of 1863 he was detailed for duty in the office of the Provost Marshal, to prepare measures for enforcing the draft of men for the army, which had been ordered by Uncle Sam, and which caused the hurried departure of several able-bodied individuals of the community to some place more agreeable to their health.

It was during Wright's term that pocket knives, gold pens, and ink erasers were distributed to members of the Legislature, state officers, and newspaper reporters, the state footing the bill.

In 1867, John became the Deputy of the Register of the State Land Office, serving until 1876, when he resigned. His successor served but one year, when he resigned, and John was re-appointed, solely on his merits, serving until 1883, when the office was abolished, but he was retained in the office as Chief Clerk until 1891, when he was detailed for service in the Government Land Office at Washington for a time.

It was during his connection with the State Land Department that most of the lands under the several grants were conveyed to the state by the United States, and by the state to the parties entitled thereto. Also, during that period, the office of Surveyor General, located at Dubuque, was discontinued, and all the original field notes and other fixtures of the office were turned over to the State Land Office.

In all business transactions of the office, John was extremely cautious to avoid mistakes, and especially in preparing for publication the biennial reports of the office in which were given a complete history of the several land grants, the laws, state and congressional, together with judicial decisions relating and pertaining thereto.

Riparian rights on our meandered lakes and rivers, with all facts relating thereto, were fully set forth, with such suggestions as were deemed advisable.

These reports have been of invaluable service to lawyers and courts, because of their integrity and comprehensiveness in the multifarious litigation by railroads and others, growing out of land grants and land laws.

While the railroads are now vigorously being hauled into courts charged with various acts of malfeasance, a reading of the Acts of Congress and the Iowa Legislature of July, 1856, granting land to the three railroads which now cross the state, in which the roads were unmistakably deemed to be public highways, and to be controlled by Congress and the Legislature of Iowa, is pertinent. It provided that the troops and property of the United States shall be free from toll or any charges; that the railroad companies shall at all times be subject to such rules and regulations as shall from time to time be enacted and provided by the General Assembly of the State of Iowa, and the Acts of Congress. They shall make a regular annual report of their proceedings at the usual time and place of electing their officers, exhibiting their expenditures, liabilities, etc., a copy of which shall be filed in the office of the Secretary of State.

In all his thirty-eight years of service as a public officer, John was true to his trust; his integrity never doubted; was invulnerable to the many opportunities for self-aggrandizement, so that to-day his only compunction of conscience is the acceptance of a pocket knife in 1864, through the blandishment of his superior, Doctor Wright; but they all did it.

John was economical, frugal in habits, "salted" his surplus earnings, and soon after he came to Des Moines loaned Alex. Scott, who had built the State House and got into financial straits, some money—land was cheap, lots of it to the acre, and money scarce. The loan was secured by mortgage on the most cherished tract of all the land Scott owned on the East Side, which, after several extensions, he could not redeem. It fell to John, and there he built a home. But a few rods away rest the remains of Scott, neglected, undesignated, covered with rubbish, a shame and disgrace to the great State

of Iowa, to which he gave the ground on which the State House was built, and a portion of the money to build it; died in poverty, and was buried by the charity of friends.

John was a Whig from the start. He cast his first vote in Iowa in 1855, for John C. Lockwood, the Whig candidate for Registrar of the Des Moines River Improvement Company, which became bankrupt, after squandering the proceeds of millions of acres of the public domain, for which the state received three uncompleted dams, two old scows, no river improvement, and numerous other damns all over the state.

Socially, John is unobtrusive, genial in temperament, and ever enjoys a quiet conversation with some old-timer. He spends his time mostly about his home, contented and happy.

June Twenty-fourth, 1906.

Transcribed from:
PIONEERS OF POLK COUNTY, IOWA AND REMINISCENCES OF EARLY DAYS
by L. F. Andrews
Volume II
Des Moines
Baker-Trisler Company
1908