



JOHN A. KASSON

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JOHN A. KASSON was born near Burlington, Vermont, January Eleventh, 1822. He received his education at the University of Vermont, graduating in 1842. His legal studies were prosecuted in Massachusetts, where he was admitted to the Bar.

He came to Des Moines early in 1857, and at once began the practice of law. During the Fall of that year, the Seat of Government was removed from Iowa City, and he was appointed by Governor Lowe as chairman of a commission to investigate the condition of the several state offices.

The contest between the East and West Side over the location of the State House was still brewing. The West Siders had filed a protest with the Legislature against the decision of the Commissioners respecting the location, charging violation of the statutes, bribery and corruption; "that, notwithstanding the people and citizens on the west side of Des Moines River offered to donate to the state sufficient land for public use, and to make a donation of funds to the amount of two hundred thousand dollars besides, to have the Seat of Government located on that side; that the Commissioners did locate it on the East Side, without any donation of land other than for public buildings, and did receive in consideration for said location, in land and money, amounting to from seven thousand to ten thousand dollars to each Commissioner, all in the year 1856."

A committee to make full investigation of the matter was requested.

The East Siders denied all the allegations and laughed at the allegers, declaring that the two hundred thousand dollars offered by the West Siders was never intended to be paid, and was made by a lot of fellows who couldn't pay it if they would.

The investigation began in February, 1858, and Mr. Kasson was employed as an attorney for the West Siders. The evidence given before the committee showed that two hundred and fifty lots

were put up on the East Side, to be used to the best advantage in securing the location; that one John Baldwin was a go-between the Commissioners and the bonuses; that he offered to secure a location on the West Side for fifty thousand dollars; that he lived and slept with one of the Commissioners; that one of the Commissioners publicly declared he must have ten thousand dollars of the fund.

When Baldwin was put on the stand, he said he was here on real estate business, and the committee had nothing to do with his private affairs. Asked if he did not know that some of the Commissioners got an interest in some of the lots, the title being in other persons, he refused to answer.

Several witnesses, when asked if they did not know of certain Commissioners who, at the time of, or soon after the location, procured an interest in lots on the East Side, or the right to procure a title in certain contingencies, refused to answer, because it "would tend, if answered affirmatively, to bring them to public scandal."

J. A. Williamson, attorney for the East Siders, didn't hesitate to give his part in the matter. When asked if he knew of Pegram (one of the Commissioners) receiving any interest in property on the East Side, at, or soon after the location of the Capitol, replied, "Yes."

Question.—"What was the number of the lots?"

Answer.—"About fifty."

Question.—"Do you know of any other Commissioner having an interest in lots here?"

Answer.—"I don't. I heard such things."

Question.—"Do you know of any property or money being given to Baldwin?"

Answer.—"If I do, it is of a professional character."

Question.—"Did you know of any attempt to influence the Commissioners in the location of the Capitol?"

Answer.—"I do. I used all lawful means to get it, including Cheaspeake and Sardinian appliances and any quantity of whiskey. I solicited donations, knowing that similar appliances were being made on the other side of the river. I found one person willing to trust ten or fifteen lots in my hands, but that is my private business."

Question.—“Did they receive any gratuity in lots or money before or after the location was made?”

Answer.—“It is possible they may have had some presents. I know some of them have property here.”

Question.—“Did Baldwin say to you, if you would give one thousand dollars in addition to the lots, he would secure the location on the East Side?”

Refused to answer.

W. A. Scott testified that the Capitol was located partly on his and Lyon’s addition to the Town of Demoine.

Asked if he, at or about the time of the location, did convey, or agree to convey or hold in trust, any part of his property to any of the Commissioners, he refused to answer.

Lyon testified that he let Baldwin have ten lots in consideration of his influence, to get the location on the East Side.

The West Siders all testified that they offered ten or twenty acres for a site and a subscription fund of one hundred and fifty-nine thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars as a bonus to the state.

Lovell White testified that he owned property on the West Side, was a witness by compulsion, and under protest; that three days before the location was made, Baldwin told him the West Side must put up money; that for twenty thousand dollars guaranteed to him, he would secure the location on the West Side. The next day he offered it for fifteen thousand dollars; the West Siders at once raised twelve thousand dollars, and notified the Commissioners they were ready to meet them, and the next day was set for meeting them to consider their proposition; that the subscription was increased nearly two thousand dollars; that at the appointed meeting it was offered to the Commissioners, when they were informed that the location was made the previous night.

The committee reported to the Legislature that in their opinion Pegram was bribed; that Baldwin had the Commissioners for sale to the highest bidder on both sides of the river; that all of them could not be identified with fraud and corruption because testimony was withheld, and the committee had not the power to bring it out; that nothing was found on which to base a charge against Commissioner Goodrell.

The report was pigeonholed and never heard of again, the West Siders claiming that Governor Grimes was mixed up in the deal, and further publicity would cause greater scandal.

Whatever may be the true history of this affair, it is true that W. A. Scott and Harrison Lyon, and a few others, fulfilled their agreement, furnished the site of the present Capitol, built a temporary State House, and gave them to the state, with a sacrifice nearly reaching bankruptcy.

In 1858, Mr. Kasson was elected Chairman of the Republican State Central Committee, and under his skillful management the Republicans carried the county, except the county offices, but that was the last victory for the Democrats.

In 1860, he was elected a delegate to the Republican National Convention which nominated Lincoln for President, and Horace Greeley said Kasson was the author of the memorable platform put forth by the convention.

In 1861, the second appointment made by President Lincoln was that of Mr. Kasson, as First Assistant Postmaster General. While in that office, he revised all the postal laws, secured a uniform rate of postage at home and with foreign countries.

In 1862, while he was attending the International Postal Convention in Paris, he was nominated for Congressman from this district, then comprising twenty-three counties. On his return, he accepted it. During his term, one of the most important periods in our national history, he proved of great value to the Government.

At the end of his term, he was renominated, his opponent being "Dan" Finch, his law partner. The two were the most eloquent and effective speakers in the state. They traveled, roomed, ate, and slept together, and had a lively campaign. The only discouragement experienced during the torrid season, they used to say, was the voracity of the bedbugs at some of the rural hostelries. In the contest, "Dan" lost his case.

Soon after his election, Mr. Kasson was delegated by the Postoffice (sic) Department to select a site for a new Postoffice (sic) in Des Moines. Business was then all below Fourth Street, the town was growing rapidly, and corner lots in that section were held at big figures. Kasson resorted to a little strategy. He had a personal friend purchase the block where the Postoffice (sic) now is, at a fair valuation for

property outside of the business district, "merely as an investment." The Methodist Church stood north of it on Fifth Street, and the Valley Bank east of it on Court Avenue. On the block where the Youngerman Block is was (sic) a small one-story dwelling with a "dug-out" cellar beside it. When the Government got ready to erect the building, the site was deeded to Uncle Sam, to the great surprise of corner-lot speculators.

In 1867, Kasson was nominated for Congressman, but Frank Palmer, editor of the *Register*, Tom Withrow, a leading lawyer, and C. C. Nourse, Judge of the District Court, were opposed to him, and there ensued one of the most bitter, acrimonious contests ever known in the party. Domestic affairs were bruited with great venom, engendering personal and social animosities, which existed for many years. Kasson was defeated.

Nourse's term was near its end. He was a fine lawyer and able judge. Under other conditions, he would have been re-elected, but the friends of Kasson determined to rebuke him for his action in the Congressional contest. They packed the Judicial Convention and defeated his nomination. He at once resigned the office and returned to law practice.

Soon after his defeat, Kasson was commissioned by the Postal Department to the International Postal Convention at Paris, where was established the system of uniform foreign postal rates.

While he was absent, agitation began for a new State House, on the beautiful site which belonged to the state. The old State House, hastily built, was inconvenient, and had become unsafe. It was urged that the time had come to utilize (sic) the property. There were also indications that delay might give rival localities opportunity to obstruct proceedings. Polk County became aroused and determined to push things. From his long experience in public affairs, and his well-known attachment to his home town, public sentiment naturally turned to Kasson, and, during the Summer of 1867, he was nominated Representative in the Twelfth General Assembly, while he was in Europe. On his return, he was informed thereof, and the reasons for it. He accepted, and was elected by a large majority.

Early in the session, he prepared a bill providing for a new Capitol, to cost not exceeding a million and a half dollars. So

soon as presented, rival localities showed their hands, by amendments, to cut the cost all the way to six hundred thousand dollars, and dilatory motions, one being to postpone all action until the Chicago and Northwestern Road was completed to Des Moines, so that stone and lime could be transported—thus showing the earmarks of Marshalltown—all of which, after prolonged struggle, were defeated, and the first week in March, the bill passed the House, and went to the Senate, where the opposition had so solidified itself as to succeed in so amending it as to change it entirely, and sent it back to the House so late in the session Kasson and his friends decided to let it go. It provided for a Board of Commissioners, who were to receive competitive plans for a Capitol, to cost a million, a million and a half, and two million dollars, to receive specimens of stone from quarries within the state, the same to be tested for durability, color, quality, absorption of moisture, and freezing, and to make the necessary repairs on the old State House, and report to the next General Assembly.

Mr. Kasson was re-elected to the House, and Frank Allen, then in the height of his influence and popularity as a banker and business man, was sent to the Senate.

At this session, Kasson changed his plan, and sent his Capitol bill first to the Senate, where it was quickly sent to a committee, who had the plans and specifications provided by the Act of the previous session. With slight amendments, the bill passed, and was sent to the House, where Kasson was confronted with a new opposition element. There was in existence what was called the "Appropriation Ring," composed of members representing the different districts in which were located the several State Institutions, which practically controlled all legislation. It fixed and parceled out the sums wanted for their institutions, and no important bill could get through either house unless by consent of this Ring, which demanded first that its claims be conceded. A personal observation and attendance at each consecutive session for more than twenty years demonstrated the continuous presence of this pernicious element. In 1878, Tom Updegraff, of Clayton, determined to break it up. There was asked an extraordinary appropriation of seventy-five thousand dollars, for the central dome and four turrets of the Capitol. The Ring resorted to its usual tactics, and

relegated the Capitol to the foot of the calendar, as the tail-ender. Tom got wrathful, and one day arose to smite it. He was a splendid speaker, and had a vocabulary replete with keen, cutting sarcasm. He charged the Ring with wilful abuse of legislative duties; he cited the vote from the roll call of each member of it, showing its vote as a unit on every important measure. Instantly, the House was in an uproar. He was called to order, but he went on, and closed in these words:

"Gentlemen of the Ring, you may go on and block the wheels of legislation, but I warn you there is nothing, save the wrath of Almighty God, so terrible as the vengeance of an outraged, indignant people."

That speech sent him to Congress, and broke the Ring for that session. In addition to this ring, Kasson found the opposition more completely organized, under the leadership of M. E. Cutts, of Mahaska, master of rhetoric, sarcasm, and innuendo. He coddled the Ring, and scared the timid with the stupendous grabs, taxes, and folly of the Capitol scheme, concocted solely for the benefit of Des Moines. For a whole month, Kasson sought, with all his skill and tactics, to get the bill made a special order for March Eighth, when it was taken up, and after the most exciting debate ever known in the House, it was ordered engrossed for final passage by a vote of forty-nine to forty-eight, and there Kasson stopped, for Cutts had so terrified the timid and unified the Ring for four weeks, he did not dare to call it up.

Finally, he fixed April Eighth as the day for a final contest, with assurances of a full house. The House was densely packed. The bill was quickly taken up, and met with dilatory motions, which were finally lost, and the roll call began, the clerk reading very slowly, amid the breathless silence. Every member was keeping close tally. On verifying the call, Kasson's "Aye" was missing. In his intensity of tally-keeping, he answered his call with "twenty," he being the twentieth in his list of "ayes." The error was soon corrected, and the vote stood fifty-two to forty-six, three members dodging or being absent. There was a shout which made the walls shake.

The bill went over to the Senate, where it quickly passed, and the second contest was ended.

A mass meeting of citizens was held, and, with a band of music, went to Kasson's home, and after congratulations on his success, presented him with a fine gold-topped cane, which Charles Aldrich now has in his state collection of curios.

The nine Commissioners provided for in the Act were elected at a joint meeting of both houses, and went on to lay the foundation of the new building. They brought a huge red granite boulder from Buchanan County, which was formed into a large cube, on which they had cut, conspicuously, their several names. They also prepared small cubes of various kinds of stone offered for the superstructure, which were sent to experts to be tested, and be returned in sealed wrappings, on which was to be inscribed nothing but the test. From these, a selection of stone was made. During the next Winter, the frost so disintegrated the foundation that it tumbled into the pit. The appropriation was exhausted, and the Commission could go no further.

When the next General Assembly convened, the prospect was dismal. The wreck and waste in that foundation was foreboding. The air was full of charges and counter-charges, while rumors were current that the stone quarry selected to furnish the stone for the superstructure had come into possession of one of the Commissioners. Amid all this was the fear that the whole project might be lost to Des Moines.

The Senate at once began measures to fix the responsibility for the defective foundation, and certain suspicious contracts. A Joint Resolution was adopted, providing for an investigation by a joint committee. Its own Committee on Public Buildings was also instructed to make investigation. The result was the condemnation of the whole business in emphatic terms, and the Commissioners' names erased from the corner-stone.

The field was then open for a new contest. Kasson, who had again been pressed into service, at once prepared a bill, amending the former Act, providing for the appointment of J. G. Foote, of Burlington; Maturin L. Fisher, of Clayton; Robert S. Finkbine and Peter A. Dey, of Johnson—two Republicans and two Democrats—as Commissioners to construct the building, the Governor to be *ex-officio* chairman, and the appropriation of one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars annually. The old fight was resumed.

Cutts had been left at home, but Ainsworth, of Fayette—who, though unequal to Cutts, was an antagonist Kasson found not easily handled—took the opposition leadership, and tried to cut the appropriation to a total sum of seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars, but after a long contest, with dilatory motions and amendments, Kasson succeeded, with the agreement that the Commission must keep in view one million five hundred thousand dollars as the cost, whereupon Ainsworth revealed the presence of the old Ring by moving that all other appropriations must be paid first. So adroitly did he put it, the House adopted it, Kasson shrewdly not resisting, relying on the Senate to squelch it, as it did the next day, and sent it back to the House, where it was taken up and passed the same day, by a vote of fifty-three to thirty-eight, and the five years' eventful contest was ended.

The new Commission at once removed the rotten foundation, cut the names of the former Commissioners from the corner-stone, and substituted the word "Iowa"—only that, and nothing more—went forward and completed the building with honesty and fidelity which received universal commendation from beginning to end. Not a dollar was lost or misspent. Every contractor for material learned early—some to their severe cost—that a contract must be executed strictly according to terms, without hope of change, concessions or rebates. An instance of their rigidity of rule is that one day I went to their office, and found General Ed Wright, their Secretary, with a large table spread with bills and vouchers, and very much excited. Asked if they were going to move. "No," he replied. "That man over there (indicating Foote) in the corner, is short two cents in his last quarterly account, and he has kept this office stirred up for two weeks to find where they went. 'Bob' and I offered to give him the pennies, but he won't have it." Finally, among the thousands of bills was found one in dubious writing. It was returned to the maker for a duplicate that could be deciphered. In the duplicate, it was found a figure five in the cents column had been mistaken for a figure three.

When the building was completed and the Commission closed their accounts, there was a discrepancy of about three dollars, but wherein, the Legislature never sought to learn.

In 1873, Kasson was again elected Congressman; reelected in 1875; declined renomination in 1877; was appointed United States Minister to Austria, served four years, and while absent in 1881, was again elected Congressman, reelected in 1883, served one year, and resigned, when he was immediately appointed United States Minister to Berlin, resigning in 1885. In 1889, he was again sent to Berlin to attend the International Conference to settle difficulties between the American, German, and English governments, and upon the accomplishment thereof, he came home.

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