



JOHN H. GIVEN

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AN active, zealous promoter of the growth and prosperity of Des Moines was John H. Given. Its development was his constant desire and incentive to action. Very few men were more widely known in Polk County in the early days, or were more helpful to the betterment of the community. He was one of the solid men of those days.

Of English descent, a native of Virginia, his youth was passed on a farm, his education obtained during Winter months in the District School. At the age of seventeen, he entered an apprenticeship to learn the trade of wagon-maker. After five years' service, he attended college one year, and in 1842, came to Iowa, stopping for a time at Dahlonga, near Ottumwa, where, among strangers, in a new country, at twenty-three years of age, with no capital but a vigorous, healthy body, persistent energy, prudence and industry, he began business life and to grow up with the country. While there, public attention was turning toward Fort Des Moines as a trade center, and in October, 1845, when the last payment was made to the Indians, he came to The Fort and purchased land claims.

That was an interesting event in the history of the town and county. It was the final assemblage of the Indians prior to their exodus from the country. There was present Keokuk, the great orator and diplomat of his tribe; Poweshiek, young Black Hawk, Kiskekosh, Pasishamone, and other head men. The emotions which filled the hearts of those venerable chiefs, as they received their last stipend for what had been the home of their people for generations, with full consciousness that immediately they must turn their backs upon it all and go where they would soon be lost in oblivion and national annihilation by a race to whom they had been friendly and true in turbulent and perilous times, must have been soul-stirring. Keokuk did not long survive the change. Three years later, he went to the happy hunting-grounds of Manitou, the Great Spirit.

The payments were made in silver, in accordance with the allotment to each tribe per capita, after deducting claims presented by the Indian Traders, which were often the source of much contention, and some which would hardly pass an examination by a mutual insurance investigating committee. The exorbitant prices charged, the excessive number of blanket coats, thermometers and other articles which the Indians never used, and the frequent repetition of such charges, indicated clearly that the Indian Trader was not in business for his health; that some claims were utterly spurious. What was left—usually very little—was turned over to Keokuk in a lump, and by him distributed to those entitled to it, and it was soon squandered.

Keokuk's signature appears many times on the old agency records, and it is written Ke-O-Kuk, as though to emphasize and give accent to it, which was also the correct way of speaking it. He was very proud of that big "O."

In May, 1851, Given came to The Fort for a permanent residence. There were about two hundred people here. Houses were scarce, the log cabins of the soldiers' garrison being occupied, but he found an illy-constructed (sic), small, frame building, with two small rooms, at the northwest corner of Vine and Third streets, a few rods distant from the location of the flagstaff of the garrison, and where now is the Schermerhorn cold storage plant, which he and his young wife occupied until they could find a better one, as was a necessity in those days; sometimes there were two and three families in one house, and they were not apartment houses, either.

There is a discrepancy as to the exact location of the flagstaff. Dixon, in his history of Polk County, says it was in the rear of the old American House, which stood on the northeast corner of Second and Market. Another writer says it was near the corner of Third and Walnut. Judge Casady says it was standing some time after he came here, and it was standing near Market, not far from where Given had his plow shop, and southeast of it. Guy Ayers, who was a youngster, familiar with it, and tramped around it a hundred times, says it was on a line due southeast between the Guard House, which stood just north and west of where Given had his plow shop, and the officers' headquarters; that when the survey of the town

was made, the east line of Second Street nearly struck the staff about the center of the lot on the corner of Market. When the town lots were sold at public auction, in July, 1847, the purchasers did not want the flagstaff there, and it was ordered removed to another place. It was taken down, but never again raised. The people in those days were more interested in bread and butter than "Old Glory."

Immediately after his arrival, Given started a wagon shop, between Vine and Second streets, in the rear of his residence, where Green's foundry now is, and, to meet the demands of the rapid increase of settlers on farm lands, he added to his business farm implements. The first implement a farmer wanted was a plow, and he made plows. The first year, he turned out over two hundred plows. His plows were a great benefit to the pioneer farmers. Des Moines was the central point of trade for a large area of country. Sometimes, a farmer would come to get supplies for a whole Settlement, who had given him a memorandum of their wants, written on such scraps of paper as could be found about the house, and the money to pay for them, no one farmer in those days being able to advance the funds, as money was scarce. On one occasion, three farmers came (from fifty miles south) to get family supplies, and brought their plows to be repaired. The repairing required the time of several days, which, with unexpected expenses, was more than the money in hand, so one of them returned with the family supplies, and the other two remained and dug coal for a week, to be used in the plow shop, to pay their expenses. The coal was dug out of the river banks, where it was procured for the blacksmiths of the garrison.

The plow business increased annually, so that a large brick building, 40x130, was built at the corner of Market and Second streets, and in 1888, when he retired from business, the output was about two thousand plows annually, which went all over the West His carriage business was completely "plowed under."

To obtain a more suitable residence, he purchased a lot at the corner of Seventh and Vine, where he built a brick, two-story house, that then being the most fashionable part of the town. He then tore down the frame house in which he had been living, and erected

a three-story brick hotel, which, for twenty years, was known as the Given House, subsequently as the Windsor, and several years ago was transformed to the Schermerhorn plant.

A thorough business man and property holder, he was elected a member of the Council of the Town of Fort Des Moines, in 1856. That was a year of strenuous life in Des Moines. The East and West sides were engaged in a vigorous contest over the location of the State House, the Legislature having selected Des Moines as the Capital of the state.

Given took a hand in the scrimmage, and when the West Siders raised a fund of three hundred thousand dollars to secure the location, the subscription paper shows his name there for five hundred dollars.

In 1858, the City of Des Moines having been incorporated by the Legislature, Given was elected Councilman from the Second Ward, and reelected in 1872 and 1873.

Fully appreciating the value of education, resultant from his own experience in his youth, he was actively and intensely interested in the public schools and the promotion of educational facilities. For many years, he was an influential member of the School Board, and assisted materially in laying the foundation of the present public school system.

Politically, he was a Whig, though he was raised under Democratic environments, his father being a radical Democrat, and his paternal grandfather a Democrat and large slave-holder. He cast his first vote for Henry Clay, and when the Republican Party was formed, he became a member, and so continued through life. He was not a politician in any sense of that term. His election to public office was because of public desire to get the benefit of his good judgment and excellent business qualifications.

Socially, he was a member of Pioneer Lodge, Number Twenty-two, of the Masonic fraternity, the first lodge in the city, and passed through all its official chairs except Worshipful Master. He took an active part in temperance movements, and was an influential member of the Order of Good Templars and Sons of Temperance. He was quiet and unobtrusive in manner, yet genial and companionable. His sterling integrity won the esteem of all who

knew him. His honesty in business affairs, his inexorable rule to give every man a fair deal, and his good management, secured him a competency, so that he retired from active business several years before his decease, which occurred in December, 1899.

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