



DR. M. P. TURNER

## DOCTOR M. P. TURNER

OF the early settlers who occupied a prominent place in the building of Des Moines, mention must be made of Doctor Mahlon P. Turner.

Though not one of the earliest, he came at a time when there was an open field for energy, foresight, perseverance and hard work—a time to lay the foundation of big enterprises.

He and his good wife came in 1858, each being in good financial circumstances. Their first objective was a living place, but dwelling places were scarce. The influx of population was beyond the supply of homes. Two—sometimes three—families in one house was not uncommon, and they were not apartment houses, either. Dwelling houses in those days were small. The only house I could get in which to begin housekeeping when I came here was a one-story structure with two rooms about 12x14, with no cellar, on Locust Street, near the present Crocker Building.

After a few months, the Doctor found a house far out in the country, where North Des Moines now is, quite unlike the elegant home on Forest Avenue where he ended his life.

His first impression of the town and its surroundings was that it was a good place to plant himself. He at once began to invest his money in real estate, which was easily done, for there were many whole squares of vacant lots. He was also ready for whatever might “turn up,” or to “turn up” something.

One of the pressing needs of the community was adequate means to get over the rivers. Ferries were cumbersome, inefficient, and too slow. The Doctor was emphatically a moving spirit—he wanted to see things go.

In the Spring of 1861, he secured a thirty-year charter for a toll bridge over 'Coon River—charters were cheap then—and at once proceeded to erect it, and, of course, captured all the travel from the south. It was not long before a hue-and-cry was rife that the

Doctor was getting rich with his toll bridge. The Town Council also got uneasy. The town treasury was getting no benefit from the privileges conferred.

In 1865, the bridge was carried away by a flood. An incident of its going was that a man who had been in town on business, having completed it, took the stage to return to his home. The stage was crowded inside and on top. On reaching the bridge, one of the passengers discovered he had forgotten something of great value and earnestly requested the driver to return to the hotel, to which he acceded. On again approaching the bridge, there was a heavy grind, a crash, and the bridge, tangled and torn, floated down the turbulent 'Coon.

Immediately, the "city dads" took advantage of the situation, and put in a ferry, to oust the Doctor, who was equal to the occasion. He went up the river one night, bought a small steamboat which was lying idle, and the next morning was running in opposition to the town ferry. Mayor Lamareaux was out early, and read the riot act to the Doctor, denouncing him in bitter terms, and charged him with skulduggery in getting the steamboat, to which the Doctor responded, with his usual suavity and good nature:

"It don't make a bit of difference to you how I got this boat. I am here to carry people across the river until I can build a new bridge."

He at once rebuilt the bridge and went on with his toll gathering, but the opposition to it became so extensive and strenuous he changed tactics. He was noted for expediency; he never got into a place so tight he didn't find a way to get out. He went quietly among the farmers and those who used the bridge, and secured subscriptions for their estimated value of the bridge to them, and thus collected the entire cost of the bridge, whereupon he tendered it to the Town Council, conditioned that it was to be free to the public from that time—1868—"forever and forever."

In 1871, when bridging Des Moines River had become quite expensive, the City Council ordered collection of toll on all bridges, but they very soon ran up against the Doctor's perpetual free bridge. The people from south of 'Coon refused to pay toll on a bridge they had bought and paid for. There was no getting around

the valid contract made with the Doctor. To get out of the dilemma, the Council declared the bridge unsafe, condemned it, and sent men to take up the floor. While they were at work, a body of Bloomfield citizens swept down on them like a Japanese assault, routed them and relaid the floor. It looked warlike for a time. Both sides were belligerent, but wise counsel prevailed. The bridge was torn down in 1872, a new one erected, and it is there now, but in shaky condition. Thus ended the Doctor's "forever and forever free" contract.

In 1866, with U. B. White, the Doctor built the second bridge over the Des Moines, at Court Avenue, the first having been torn down. In 1869, it floated down-stream on a high wave, and was replaced by an iron bridge.

In 1866, the Doctor organized and procured a perpetual charter for a street railway on all streets, to be operated by animal power—another instance in which he outwitted the "city dads"—and became the putative father of the present magnificent street railway system, with its one hundred and seven big cars and sixty-two and one-half miles of track, unlike in uniqueness any in the United States. He secured the financial aid of J. S. Polk, Fred. M. Hubbell, and U. B. White, and built the first mile of road from the Court House, on Court Avenue, to Capitol Hill. It was a chimerical undertaking. It began nowhere and ended the same. The town was small, the population scattered, and Court Avenue was the only business east-and-west street. The track—narrow-gauge—was laid on the surface; there was no pavement. The cars were small, having a capacity for about twenty persons. The motive power was a pair of mules. Their speed limit under the charter was six miles an hour, to go around street corners at a walk, and cars to be kept two hundred feet apart when in motion, but the Doctor was never made defendant in an action for damages for "fast running," or runaways from defective brakes, for, if the brakes failed to hold the cars on a down grade, the mules would, as John Hamilton, now a motorman on the Sevastopol line, can probably testify, for he drove them to the end of the mule-car service.

The road was a great accommodation to women and children. It was too slow for men, except in bad, wet weather, and then it

was not uncommon that the car would slip off the rail, and the men would have to get off and lift it back in place. Sometimes the mules, in floundering through the slippery clay mud, would fall and both lay flat on their back, which gave John no uneasiness—the mules were used to it—but it made the women and children hysterical.

It was a mirth-provoking outfit, and the Doctor was often given humorous jibes thereon, but he always received them in his genial way, with the reply:

“Never mind; just wait. This is only a beginning. This town is going to grow. Just give us a chance.”

With firm faith in Des Moines, patience and perseverance, the Doctor worked on, despite discouragements which would have balked many men.

After several months, the track was laid through an alley at the foot of the hill to Walnut Street, then east to Fourth Street, then to place of beginning, thus forming a loop.

In 1872, he had added two and one-half miles of track west on Walnut and High streets, and east on Grand Avenue to Tenth Street, but it did not pay one hundred per cent to his partners, and they seceded, the Doctor purchasing all their interest except that of White, which was taken by Mrs. Turner. A new company was formed, with the Doctor as President and Manager, and his wife as Secretary and Treasurer, and for fourteen years they extended and operated the “Des Moines Street Railway Company.”

In the meantime, H. E. Teachout formed a company and got a charter for a broad-gauge road on Locust and other streets, the motive power being horses. The equipment was more up-to-date than that of the Doctor's, and soon began to crowd him. He went into court with his perpetual charter and asked an injunction against the use of animal power by the Teachout company, in violation of an exclusive prior charter. The courts sustained the Doctor's claim, whereupon Teachout changed his motive power to electricity, and competition with the Doctor became lively in the occupation of streets, etc.

Mr. Polk was also developing a street railway system under a charter for the Rapid Transit Company, which gave the right to

use steam, cable or electricity as the motive power, and, in 1895, he purchased all the rights, title and interest of the other companies, consolidated them under the name of the Des Moines City Railway Company, established an entire new system, and proceeded to gridiron the city with his tracks.

The first, and for many years the only amusement hall, was built by the Doctor. It is the building now occupied by the Purity Candy Company, on Court Avenue, at the alley corner east of Fourth Street.

After disposing of his street railway, he devoted his time to improving his holdings of real estate, a notable example of which is the elegant seven-story building, corner of Seventh Street and Grand Avenue, recently occupied by the Studebaker Carriage Repository.

The ground occupied by Drake University was purchased from him.

The Doctor was not a politician, and never sought a partisan office, but, being a man of affairs, with large property interests, and being popular, he was elected Alderman for the Fourth Ward in 1854 and 1855, the ward being strongly Democratic and Anti-Prohibition, the Doctor being a radical Republican and anti-saloon man.

He was an earnest and helpful supporter of schools and churches, a real friend of the laboring class, kind-hearted, benevolent, genial, optimistic to eccentricity, for he saw only the bright side of things; in business undertakings, whatever the discouragements, he saw only the "greater Des Moines," ultimate success. Even in the last year of his life, when disease was slowly eating away his vitality, he clung to hope. Meeting him on the streets a few days before he lay down never to rise, in reply to a query as to his health, he replied: "Oh, I am gaining a little every day. I believe I will come out all right." That was the spirit of the man in all things.

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