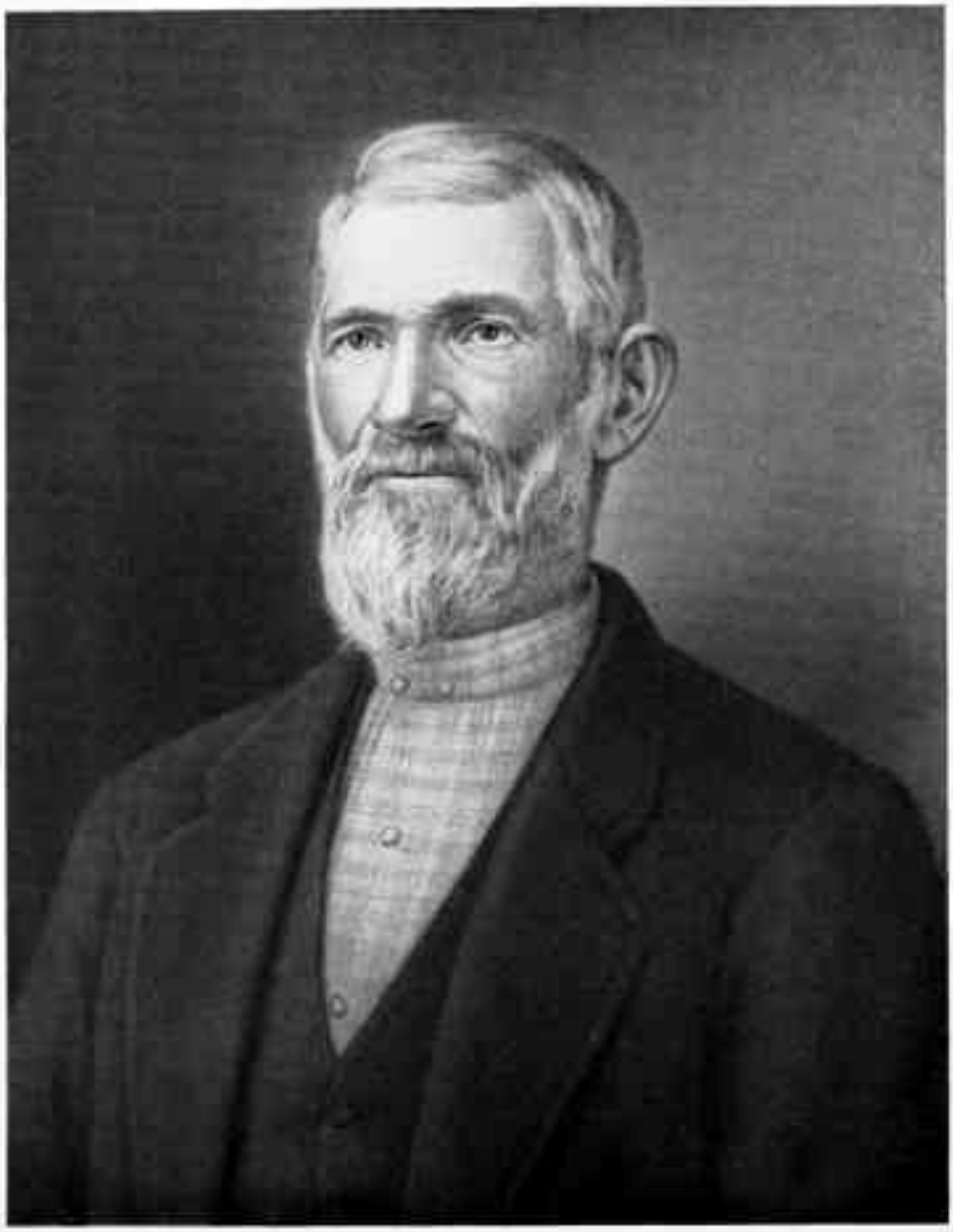

PETER NEWCOMER

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PASSENGERS on the Winterset Branch of the Rock Island Road, just after leaving the city, pass a narrow space between the high bluff and the river, barely wide enough for the track, known as "Newcomer's Point," named from Peter Newcomer, one of the very earliest settlers in Polk County. It was an important landmark in the early days to the emigrant.

Newcomer came here with the soldiers, in 1843, and was employed as a carpenter in building barracks at the garrison, his family living in a cabin at the Agency and Trading Post, down where the packing-houses now are. There were about twenty people living there, outside of the garrison.

Soon after the garrison was established, a military road was laid out to Toole's Point, now Monroe, in Jasper County, where connection could be made with a road to Eddyville, and thence to Burlington, or Keokuk. Between the garrison and Eddyville there was nothing but wild prairie and timber. To aid in opening this road, and making it passable for transporting supplies for the garrison, Captain Allen, the garrison commander, soon saw the necessity for bridges. Four Mile Creek was a serious impediment, as its bed and banks for some distance were such spongy drift that it was nearly impassable for teams several months in the year.

To get the bridges was the problem. To get a request for authority to build them through the circumlocution offices at Washington was dubious, and would probably result as did his request to have the Post named Fort Raccoon, and made a double-ration Post, which got tangled up in a contest between the War and Treasury Departments, where it lay for two years without reply. There was no local government machinery to which he could apply for relief, so he offered Newcomer a permit to make a claim for three hundred and twenty acres of land if he would build a bridge over Four Mile Creek. That was Peter's opportunity. The offer was promptly

accepted. He built the bridge, the first within the county, and for many years it was a noted landmark to teamsters, who, after weary hours of toil and struggle, with heavy loads and fatigued teams, far into the night, when they reached that bridge, took fresh courage, for they knew they were only four miles from home. By daylight, the Point was conspicuous, as it could be seen a long distance away.

His permit was not limited to any locality, but the supposition was the claim would be made near the bridge, which was built near where the Rock Island Road crosses the creek, just east of the city limits, the stream being so tortuous the railroad crosses it four times. He, however, made his claim along the big bend in Des Moines River, in what is now Grant Township, and adjoining the city on the east side, following the custom of newcomers, to settle along rivers and creeks, and near their skirting timber. At numerous places along the streams were abrupt, short turns, which, when viewed from a distance on the prairie, gave them the appearance of a point, and they were given the names of the settlers who first located the land comprising them, thus we have Newcomer's Point, Toole's Point, and many others.

So soon as he located his claim, he built a small cabin, in which he installed himself and young wife. Though isolated from civilized life, there being no other settlers within several miles, and Keokuk's Indian village not far away, they often declared they found great enjoyment and pleasure in making their new home.

The usual experience and deprivation of pioneers was theirs. Although he was a carpenter, able to construct many household articles of use and convenience, there was no lumber, the mills were fifty miles away. He improvised from timber, chairs, tables, etc., and one day his wife wanted a churn. He peeled the bark from a green hickory tree, fitted a bottom in one end, a dasher top to the other end, and she said it made as good a butter as any churn. There were no mills nearer than Fairfield, and when flour or meal was wanted, he had to go there, and often so thronged were the mills by persons waiting for their grinding to be done, he would be compelled to wait several days or go on east; he would go on, sometimes one hundred and forty miles, in bad storms, with no place to get shelter.

In less than one month after the soldiers left, on April Sixth, 1846, was held the first election in Polk County, to elect county officers. At that election, it seems, from the returns, that everybody voted who wanted to, for there were one hundred and seventy-five ballots cast in the county, of which seventy were at The Fort. An official census taken twelve days after the election showed there were but one hundred and twenty-seven persons, men, women, and children, living at The Fort, of whom thirty-four were male adults, and all of them are now dead except Judge Casady and Ed. Clapp. Ed. was then only nineteen years old, but he probably voted, as did Daniel Trullinger, at "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell's house, within thirty minutes after he came into the county. The remaining thirty-six votes may be therefore credited to ambitious young persons. But the pioneers were not punctilious in such matters. They were largely a law unto themselves. Public offices were not worth much, anyhow. G. B. Clark got only thirty dollars for making the first assessment of the whole county, and Addison Michael, the County Collector, got ten dollars and ninety-six cents for collecting taxes of that assessment.

Soon after the garrison was established, a mail route was opened to Keokuk, and Josiah Smart, the Indian Interpreter at the Agency, was appointed Postmaster, but he resigned, and Doctor T. K. Brooks, the first physician, was appointed in March, 1846. The mail was brought on horseback on Wednesday, and departed the next day. The mail bringing the Doctor's commission and bond was water-soaked, not unusual, when there were no bridges, streams flooded, and the horse had to swim when crossing. The bond was signed by Newcomer and "Uncle Jerry" Church, who, with his "magnificent town" of Dudley, was a vigorous contestant for the location of the Capital.

Newcomer improved his farm by good cultivation and the erection of good and commodious buildings, so that, by good management, he became quite wealthy. In 1847, he, with Isaac Cooper, brought the first reaper and mower into Polk County. It was an expensive investment, and indicated the energy and enterprise of the pioneers.

In 1848, when the Settlers' Claim Club was permanently organized for protection of their claims against claim-jumpers and land speculators, Newcomer was an active member, and woe betide the fellow who was discovered strolling about the county plotting some land grab.

In 1856, when the contest for the location of the Capitol was on, Newcomer joined "Uncle Jerry" in his Dudley scheme, and when that failed, he joined the Brooks and Scott junta on the East Side.

Politically, Newcomer was an old-line Whig, of the Maryland persuasion, and took an active part in political affairs. As a stump-speaker, he was noted for the directness and bluntness of his vocabulary. In state and local matters, he was radically independent, and somewhat peculiar. In 1848, the Legislature had passed an exemption law, giving a debtor protection against seizure to the value of five hundred dollars. He was tinctured with the old-time Southern ideas respecting obligations, and vigorously criticized Judge Casady, who was Senator from Polk County, for supporting the law, and when the Judge told him the next Legislature would increase the exemption to a homestead, he became furious, and at once took the stump as an independent candidate for Governor, opposed to any measure to prevent a person from paying his honest debts, and he had a very good support. The next Legislature, in 1851, enacted the Homestead Exemption Law, and it remains on the statute book to-day.

Socially, Newcomer was unostentatious, and active in promoting all measures for the betterment of the community.

In the early 'Sixties, he became so debilitated from acute indigestion he was unable to perform any manual labor for two years. He became a vegetarian, his diet consisting of unleavened bread, eggs, and milk. I took dinner with him one day. The spread was not very attractive to an ordinary hungry person, but it was neatly served, was wholesome and nutritious. By that system, he regained perfect health and physical strength.

A few years later, he went to Texas, where he died in 1891, at the age of seventy-nine.

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