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OF the pioneers of Des Moines who came early, grew up with the town, and became prominent factors in civic affairs was William W. Williamson, or Judge, as he was more familiarly known, a Kentuckian by birth.

On learning, through the newspapers, in 1848, that the Capital of the state was to be removed from Iowa City to Monroe City, which had been selected by a lot of Quakers appointed by the Legislature, because of faith in them to resist the machinations of sharpers, speculators, and temptations of "the flesh and the devil." So, with his wife, a carriage, and two fine Kentucky thoroughbred horses, they embarked on a steamboat for Keokuk, via Saint Louis. From Keokuk, they journeyed to Monroe City. Prospectively, it was a beautiful city. It was platted with parks, boulevards, fountains, wide streets, and so forth, but when they arrived there, said Mrs. Williamson, a few days ago, "There was nothing but a lot of stakes set all over the town, not a building in sight in any direction, and we went on to Fairfield."

The Quakers had "fallen from grace," been caught in the wiles of the Tempter, and departed from their faith. So tainted with corruption was their action, the Legislature repudiated it entirely, and the future Capital was relegated to the gophers and prairie dogs.

After a short halt in Fairfield, the Judge and his wife came to Fort Des Moines. Houses were scarce, but they found a log cabin near what is now the corner of Ninth and Walnut streets, where they began their first experience in housekeeping. The log cabin being unsuitable for cold weather, they soon after moved to a small frame building with a clap-board roof, on Second Street below Vine. The house had but two small rooms, one above the other. The upper floor, or sleeping-room, was reached by means of a ladder through a hole in the floor. Upon retiring, the ladder was pulled

up after them, and they slept the sleep of the just. They were young and vigorous, and enjoyed the new life in the wild and woolly West immensely. They were both full-blooded Methodists, and tinctured with genuine Kentucky hospitality. Their house was always open to the "brethren," *sans* ceremony, sometimes to the great discomfort of the hostess, for, as she used to say: "Though they were good people, always welcome, they had good appetites, and there were times when provisions were scarce. One day, there came a preacher and his wife. I had very little flour, bacon or com meal. I wanted to make some pies, but there were no dried apples—we didn't have canned nor green fruit in those days—and I went out on the plateau north, gathered some sheep sorrel, and made the pies, and they were good."

On another occasion, in 1851, on Sunday, July Third, the whole country was flooded with high water; teams could not go anywhere to mill; the whole town was short of provisions. The next day there were to be dinners and suppers, but the larders were bare, and everybody was anxiously waiting the coming of a steamboat with supplies. A large gathering had assembled in a frame building on Walnut Street, where the Simon clothing store now is, when the small whistle of a steamboat broke in upon them. Instantly, the entire assemblage made a rush for the river, and the meeting closed without a benediction from the preacher. The people were more interested in flour and bacon than Biblical rhetoric, and they gave the steamboat a rousing welcome, for it was loaded with just what they wanted.

In 1851, the Whigs resurrected the wreck of the *Fort Des Moines Gazette*, which Lamp. Sherman had laid away after a vain effort to keep it afloat, and February Twenty-eighth, issued the first number of the *Iowa State Journal*, with Peter Myers & Company publishers, and Williamson the leading editor. It was during the Presidential campaign of General Winfield Scott, and the paper did effective service, but Whigs were in the minority, the paper received no public patronage, and in August, 1852, ceased to be, and Williamson went back to his law books.

Under the Legislative Act of 1846, organizing Polk County, the counties of Story, Boone, and Dallas, and all the territory north and

west thereof were attached to Polk for election, revenue and judicial purposes, and all residents therein could vote for national, state, and county officers as being in Polk County.

In 1847, a new voting precinct was established, comprising the County of Boone and all the territory north and west of it.

In 1849, a new County of Boone was established, entirely independent of Polk, with prescribed limits, but no provision was made for the unorganized territory, north and west, for election or judicial purposes, hence, *de facto*, it did not belong to Polk nor Boone.

In April, 1853, Williamson was elected Prosecuting Attorney, and served one year, being succeeded by Barlow Granger, the Democrats making a special effort to get control of all the county offices.

At the same election, he was elected one of the Council of the "Original Town of Fort Des Moines." There were no wards, the Councilmen being elected by the people at large. He held the office one term.

In 1855, at the Democratic nominating convention, McFarland and Judge Curtis Bates were candidates, The Fort supporting the latter. A count of noses showed the vote would be close, but late in the session a fellow came in claiming to represent King County, up in what is now a part of Sac County, a county which had never been heard of. He was admitted, and voted for McFarland, giving him a majority of one vote. Of course, Bates' friends were mad.

The Whigs nominated Williamson, who had become prominent and popular. The Know-Nothing craze was flourishing, with its shiboleth, "Americans to Rule Americans," and the small, diamond-shaped paper frequently scattered about the streets as notice of an immediate meeting of the clan somewhere, operated as a red rag to the Irish, Scandinavians, and Dutch. This element, and some of Bates' friends, affiliated with the Whigs. The Capital re-location subject and the gubernatorial campaign were also on, so that the whole country was considerably stirred up.

At the election, the returns showed that Williamson had a small majority. The Democrats asked for a postponement until the "back country" could be heard from, but he was declared elected, and was given his commission by the Governor. In the meantime,

some poll books were sent in from Butler County, which had just been organized out of the territory formerly belonging to Polk County, but which had been cut off from all jurisdiction by the Act of 1849. The Democrats claimed the poll books should be recognized and the votes counted. The question was referred to the Judges of Election, two Democrats and one Whig, who accepted the poll books and counted their forty votes for McFarland. John A. Hull, of Boone, a prominent politician in those days, contested the election, claiming that the forty votes given to McFarland were illegal, as not a name of a voter appeared on the alleged poll books, neither were they signed by anybody as Judge or Clerk of Election. The contest went to the Supreme Court, where it was decided that unless fraud could be shown in the election, the votes must be counted, notwithstanding there were some irregularities, the court thus ignoring the fact that the votes were cast in Butler County, which had been attached to another district entirely for election purposes.

McFarland got the place, and learning that Hull had been seeking to defeat him, recalled the fact that Hull owed him for a barrel of lime. He sued for the value of the lime, and got a judgment in a Justice Court. Hull paid the judgment, but McFarland's temper having cooled, he refused to take it, and it went to the heirs of the estate of the Justice.

Though Williamson did not get the place, he got the title, which stuck to the end of his days.

He had the usual experience of other lawyers with the bibulous McFarland. One day, when he and his opponent were arguing a case, the Judge was so drunk he tumbled off his chair. Gathering himself into his seat again, he said: "Go on with your d\_\_n speechifying. I'll show you when you get through."

One morning, court had been opened, the Judge was in his seat, and the lawyers were standing about, preparing to settle down to business, when a man, ill-dressed, came straggling in and planted himself directly in front of the Judge, with his hat on. Nothing would excite the ire of the Judge more than to see a man in "open court" with his hat on.

"Well, what do you want? Take off your d\_\_d hat!" said the Judge.

"I have been elected to an office, and I want to be qualified," replied the stranger.

"I'll swear you," said the Judge, "but all h\_\_I couldn't qualify you."

In 1856, during the contest over the location of the State House, Williamson was an active West Sider, and was one of the committee who secured the three hundred thousand dollar fund to be given the state as a bonus for locating it on the West Side., and in the investigation, in 1858, of the subject, in which the Commissioners who located it on the East Side were charged with corruption and boodling, the East Siders claiming the West Siders' subscription was not worth the paper it was written on. Williamson was called as a witness and testified as follows:

"Question.—Were you a resident of Fort Des Moines at the time of the location of the Capitol?

"Answer.—I was.

"Question.—Did you know this paper (marked 'E') was in circulation about the time of the location, and if so, what was the understanding as to the subscriptions being *bona fide*?

"Answer.—My understanding was that it would not be accepted—for I had heard the Commissioners had located the Capitol on the East Side.

"Question.—Did you sign that paper with intent to pay? [He signed for five hundred dollars.]

"Answer.—Had the location been made on the west side of the river, after the subscription had been presented to the Commissioners, I presume I would have paid it.

"Question.—Did you own property on the west side of the river?

"Answer.—Yes.

"Question.—Were you influenced by that fact in subscribing?

"Answer.—In part, I was. I resided there, and for convenience wished to have it there."

Politically, the Judge was a Free Soil Whig, though the son of a slaveholder, and raised on a plantation. He was an active, leading man in his party in the early days, when there was a strong pro-slavery element among the Democrats, who did not think a Whig had any rights they should respect.

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He was a supporting pillar—financially as well as morally—of the Methodist Church and of the public schools. He brought with him to Des Moines considerable money, and as his wife once said, “He gave it all away to churches and schools.” He was a member of the West Side School Board twelve years, and devoted much of his time to the office without compensation. He was very fond of children, and a great favorite with them. Nearly every day, little ones would come to his house on the lot corner of Fifth and Locust, where the Marquardt Bank now is, bringing pictures to “Willie Willyumson,” as they called him, until nearly every room in the house was papered with them.

During the formative period of the town and city, he was identified with every movement for progress and improvement. He died in 1893.

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**by L. F. Andrews**

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