



JUDGE T. T. MORRIS

## JUDGE THOMAS T. MORRIS

A pioneer of Iowa, and a well-known old settler of Polk County is Judge Thomas T. Morris. Though a resident of Des Moines nearly forty-three years, very few people know that he had a judicial title. I did not, and I have known him well ever since he came to town, but so say the records.

Born in Cumberland County, New Jersey, October Twenty-ninth, 1822, his ancestry dating back to John Morris, an Englishman, who, in 1635, emigrated to America and settled on Manhattan Island, at Morris' Woods, now Central Park, in New York City.

In 1837, when Thomas was about fifteen years old, his parents moved to Wheeling, West Virginia, where he worked with his father, who was a brickmaker. At times, when brickmaking was dull, and the water high, he became a pilot on coal barges down the Ohio River. In 1840, the brickmaking business went out, and he went to an iron foundry to learn the trade, but soon afterward the foundry collapsed, and he started to learn the manufacture of cutlery. He was making good progress when the works became bankrupt. He then took to the water, as second engineer on a river boat, until 1844, when he learned the trade of mason, plastering and stucco work in Pittsburg, where he worked as a journeyman until 1848, when he went into business for himself as a contractor. During the following five years, he built four Catholic churches, and did the stucco work in seven of the largest and finest churches in the city. He also built a large number of costly private homes.

Early in 1855, he concluded he could do much better in the West, and June Sixth, he and his father loaded their families, household goods, horses and wagons on a boat, went down the river to Saint Louis, thence up the Mississippi to Keokuk, where, with their teams, they started northward, camping at noon to get food for themselves and their horses, and at night

stopping with some hospitable settler. They passed through Des Moines, fording the river, got dinner at the Avenue House, which stood on a high Indian mound on the northeast corner of Fourth and Court Avenue, and kept by John Hays, a pioneer of the county. A carriage was hired of Frank Laird to carry the women and children to Panora, fording 'Coon River at Adel. Thence a bee line was taken for Coplin's Grove, in Newton Township, which then embraced the south half of Carroll County, arriving July Third, where they had located a tract of Government land.

The first move was to get a house to live in. Their land lay along 'Coon River, on which was a broad timber belt. Morris cut down trees, scored and hewed on both sides logs for a cabin 18 x 24, split lumber for clapboarding, roofing and lathing. To get lumber for flooring, door and window casings, he had to go to Dunham's Grove, in Crawford County, forty miles away.

To get plaster, for he proposed having a first-class cabin, he hauled timber out on the prairie, piled it up, gathered a lot of lime rock, scattered over the prairie, placed it on the timber, covered the whole with earth and sod, set fire to the timber and burned the rock to lime, with which, and sand from the river, he plastered the ceiling of the cabin. The windows were brought with them, but they were not of extravagant dimensions.

In eight days, the cabin was ready for occupancy. In the meantime, the wagons were used for lodging and the meals prepared on a cooking-stove, brought with them.

The cabin occupied, the next move was breaking up the prairie, and securing the first crop of sod corn. If the flour bin got low, it was a journey of fifty miles to a mill near Redfield, through sloughs, across bridgeless streams, with wide detours to avoid the impassable places; not so bad in Summer, but in Winter there were trials and hardships severe. In Winter, it was usual for three or four settlers to go to mill together, for mutual aid and protection, for a blizzard on the open, trackless prairie was something to be greatly feared; once the trail was lost, in the swirling, blinding snow, it became at once a fight for life, usually ending fatally. On one occasion, when Morris, with three other settlers, went to mill for flour, a severe storm of

snow and wind set in and lasted two days and nights. The morning of the third day, they started for home, going due north, but were able to get only two miles. Then they called out the Road Supervisor, who, with sixteen men and six of the Morris party, only succeeded in getting through four miles of the deep snow that day. On other occasions (sic), when delayed by deep snow and storms, and night came on, far from a habitation, a cane-break, on which the snow had been piled high, on the border of some slough, would be sought, a cave dug out in the cane and snow, into which men and horses would take shelter for the night.

There was no want of meat. Elk, deer, prairie chickens, quail, rabbits, and squirrels were abundant on the prairie, while one side of the farm abutted on a lake known as "Morris Lake," which, in the Spring and Fall, was alive with wild duck and geese, and at all seasons a good fishing place. On the spot where the Court House now stands in Carroll County, Morris says he has hunted elk.

To keep his family larder supplied required some engineering, for the cabin of a pioneer was always open, with room inside for "one more." Land-hunters were roaming over the country, with nowhere to stay, and at one time Morris counted thirty of them for lodgment and grub in his little cabin and one like it in which his father lived. There was no limit to the hospitality of the pioneer. If there were not beds enough for the strangers, a "shake down" on the floor or on the grass, with the blue sky for a cover, was provided. They were welcome guests, for through them intelligence was received of the outside world, as there were no postoffices, and at times for four months they were without mail of any kind.

In April, 1857, Morris was elected Justice of the Peace, and served nineteen months, when he resigned.

Early in 1857, he was directed by Governor Grimes, on the advice of the Judge of the District Court, to organize the county and make the necessary preliminary arrangements for an election to elect county officers, the county then being attached to Guthrie County for judicial purposes, and to Pottawattamie County for election purposes.

At the election in October, he was elected County Judge. To make return of the election, he, with the representatives of sixteen other counties just

organized, had to take the trails over the prairies, one hundred and fifty miles, to Kaneshville (now Council Bluffs), that being the County Seat for that purpose.

His first business was to get records and stationery for his office. He came to Des Moines, bought them of Mills & Company, payment for which he drew a county warrant sealed with an impression of the eagle side of a silver half-dollar, coined by Uncle Sam.

W. H. Leas and a man named Harsh donated a tract of land for the County Seat, which was accepted. They named it Carrollton, and that was the first County Seat of Carroll County.

While Morris held the office of Judge, he was directed to levy a tax to meet the expenses of his office. He also employed surveyors to lay out the swamp lands belonging to the county.

After serving nineteen months as Judge and boss of county affairs, he concluded there was too much glory, too little pay, and he doffed the judicial robes.

Always interested in schools, he was elected School Director, and served several years. He was also elected Road Supervisor, and served two years, during which period he boosted good roads, and did that other statutory stunt so generally neglected, by placing guide-boards at every crossroads and forks of roads across the county from the Greene County line to that of Crawford County.

In the Spring of 1864, he came to Des Moines, and went to work at his trade. It was during war times, business was dull, money was scarce, so were laborers, and wages high. The community was considerably agitated by rumors current that a military draft was to be made in the county, which incited a large number of able-bodied men to seek a more congenial climate for their health, in the Far West, notwithstanding Governor Stone's proclamation forbidding " \* \* \* citizens of Iowa removing beyond the limits of the state before the Tenth day of March next. \* \* "

As business increased after the war closed, he became a contractor. His first job was the Lincoln School building, the second public school building in the city. He also built the Lucas and Curtis school buildings on the East Side, the original McQuaid store building at Seventh and Locust, one of the buildings now a part of the Foster Opera House block, the Windsor building

on Walnut between Third and Fourth, the gas works, the Reinking Block at Eighth and Walnut, which had the first pressed brick front in the city, and the Fifth Street side of the Marquardt building. For the brick used on the Marquardt building, he paid fifty dollars per thousand, delivered on cars at Philadelphia. He had at that time five hundred men in his employ.

He did the plastering and stucco work in B. F. Allen's costly residence at Terrace Hill. Allen had the stucco work done in Chicago, from special designs. It was brought from Nevada, railroads not having reached the city, by wagons, over rough roads, and when it arrived, was broken into fragments. Morris, being a trained stucco worker, went on and completed the work with acknowledged greater artistic skill than was shown in the Chicago designs.

He also built hundreds of residences, one of which was that of U. B. White, the well-known bridge builder in early days, at Seventh and Center streets. It was the first house in Des Moines in which pine lath was used. He paid ten dollars per thousand for the lath, eight cents for laying it, and eleven dollars per hundred pounds for the nails.

In 1876, he was elected a member of the City Council from the Third Ward, and assigned by Mayor Giles H. Turner to the Committee on Gas and Water. He secured a liberal extension of the service in both those departments, but he had to fight for it. Old-timers who visited that bear-garden in those days have a vivid remembrance of "Mike" Drady, "Mike" McTighe, "Mike" King, "Mike" Kavanagh, and George Sneer, who were always ready for a scrap. There were no paved streets, the city was in the mud the year round, and when the skies had a weeping-spell, Levi J. Wells could be seen riding in a skiff drawn by two horses up and down Walnut Street, as a gentle reminder that Des Moines sadly needed a boosting committee. Morris suggested paving the streets, and, to help out, offered to pave the intersection of the streets at Fourth and Court Avenue with Mulberry wood blocks, which would never wear out, as a sample of good paving, but the other fellows couldn't see it that way, and he was beaten out.

He was the first inspector of brick in the city. It was on North Street, now University Avenue. While he was doing it, an omniverous municipal functionary came around to inspect his inspection, spiced with derogatory

remarks, which was endured for several days, when Morris politely told him to keep away; that if he came there again he would \_\_\_\_\_. The warning was sufficient, and he probably has not forgotten it yet.

In all business transactions, Morris was noted for his integrity and honesty. His word was as good as his bond.

Politically, he was originally a Democrat, but when the Republican party was organized, he united with it. He also took a little part in the Know-Nothing craze, which swept over the country in 1853-1854.

Socially, he is of genial temperament, and popular with those who know him. Always interested in schools, realizing fully the necessities of childhood and youth which deprived him of seeing the inside of a public schoolhouse until after he was twenty-one years old.

Formerly, he was a member of the Order of Odd Fellows, but withdrew for religious reasons.

Religiously, he is a devout Methodist, and a zealous worker in that faith. On the second Sabbath after his arrival in Carroll County, he gathered together his nearest settlers, organized a Sunday School, and erected an altar for the worship of God, which remains to this day.

He retired from active business several years ago, but bears well the burden of his eighty-four years, has good health, and passes time as Bailiff in Judge McVey's court, satisfied and content, for, said he, a few days ago: "I know that I am living on borrowed time, but these days are the best of my life, with the blessed assurance of a home not far hence, in the mansions above."

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