

WILEY C. BURTON

One of the early settlers of Des Moines was Wiley C. Burton. The date of his coming, I do not know, but he started a store down on Second Street when all business of the town was done on that street. He took an active part in the affairs of the little town, with Doc. Campbell, Cole Noel, Granville Holland, and other old-timers.

In 1855, he was elected a member of the Town Council, when Barlow Granger was Mayor. There were no Wards, the Council being elected from the body of the people. The office was one more of honor than profit or labor. There were no chances for grafting in those days, as the town possessed little or nothing.

The same year, Wiley, with Byron Rice, Lovell White, A. Newton, and a few others, built the Exchange Block, at the northwest corner of Third and Walnut streets, the first brick building on that street. On the first floor were three dry goods stores, one grocery, Doctor Shaw's drug store, and a bank. On the second floor were the United States Land Office, the headquarters of the River Improvement Company, offices of lawyers and Justices of the Peace, and a very expensively equipped saloon. The upper floor was for small offices. It was in that building the *Iowa State Register* had its first home, and there the first daily paper of the city was issued.

In 1856, when the location of the State Capitol question came up, he was one of the leaders of the West Siders. He circulated a subscription to raise a fund of two hundred thousand dollars, to be donated to the state if the Capitol was located on the West Side, and put himself down for three thousand dollars.

The contest was vigorous on both sides. The East Siders declared the subscription fund raised on the West Side was not worth the paper it was written on, but the East Side won. The West Side was mad, and requested

the Legislature to make an investigation, which was granted, and a committee appointed therefor, but it did not meet until February, 1858. Several persons were called before the committee, and gave testimony under oath. J. T. Baldwin testified that he was here during the time the Commissioners were here, and that his business was to influence them in making a fair and just decision in locating the Capitol; that three of them put up on the East Side, and he ate and drank with them, and slept with one; that West Siders gave them the cold shoulder, while the East Siders were more hospitable and friendly, but he refused to answer any questions tending to self-incrimination. Harrison Lyon testified that he owned a portion of the land on which the location was made, and that he turned over to Baldwin ten lots, to be put where they would do the most good in securing a location.

J. A. Williamson, a lawyer, was another East Side promoter. He testified that he spent a year and a half, using all lawful and legal means, and lots of whiskey, to get the location on the East Side; that fifteen lots were intrusted to him to be used for that purpose. He refused to tell what he did with them. He said Pegram received notes for ten thousand dollars, secured by fifty lots.

Burton testified that he was one of the "getters-up" of the subscription for two hundred thousand dollars on the West Side, to be given to the state provided the Capitol was located on that side; that he went, with Granville Holland and J. M. Griffiths, on the Twenty-second of April, 1856, to notify the Commissioners that the money was being raised; that they were told no location had been made; that any offer would be taken into consideration the next day. It was shown the location had then been agreed upon.

C. C. Van, who owned a large tract of land south of the 'Coon, built a mill there, and started a town known for several years as Vantown, which has developed into the present Sevastopol, testified that Pegram said to him one day something about lots he was to get as a bonus; that a few days after the location was made, he said he had sold the lots, taking notes for them, made payable at Council Bluffs. Since then, he told him they had been paid. He said there were two hundred and fifty lots; that he was to have fifty.

Baldwin was here, and appeared to know what was going on. He said if the West Siders would raise fifty thousand dollars, the Capitol would be located on that side of the river; that he was in favor of the West Side, and believed the Commissioners were; that two hundred and fifty lots had been set apart for the Commissioners on the East Side; he was to have a share; that he had one thousand dollars the Commissioners did not know of. He asked what the West Side would give. He said Pegram had made his mark at ten thousand dollars, and they would have to come down.

Several witnesses interested in the lots said to be in the pool were called, but they refused to give answers, by advice of counsel.

W. A. Scott, who owned part of the Capitol grounds, and the land on which the old Capitol was built, being sworn, testified as follows:

"Question.—Where did you reside at the time of the location of the Capitol?

"Answer.—At this place on the east side of the river.

"Question.—Did you see the Commissioners when they were here to locate the Capitol?

"Answer.—I did.

"Question.—Did you have any conversation with them in reference to the location before it was determined?

"Answer.—Yes, sir.

"Question.—On which of these additions which I point out on the map was the Capitol located?

"Answer.—It was partly on Scott's Addition to the Town of Des Moines, and partly on Lyon's Addition.

"Question.—Did you, at or about the time of the location of the Capitol, sell and convey, or agree to convey, or agree to hold in trust, any part of your said property to or for said Commissioners, or to any or either of them?"

Witness refused to answer, "on the ground, and for the reason, that if any act done, or transaction had, between the said Commissioners and the affiant, would tend to impeach the conduct of the Commissioners, it would and will operate to impeach and disgrace affiant; and, further, the answer he would be compelled to give, taken in connection with the evidence already taken, and questions that might follow, will tend to disgrace the affiant."

The Legislative Committee in its report said:

“From the testimony, it appears that twenty acres of land, worth nearly one hundred thousand dollars, was offered to the Capitol Commissioners for the state; that, besides this, various persons offered two hundred thousand dollars’ worth of real estate as a further inducement to locate the Capitol on the west side of Des Moines River; that when the Commissioners received notice that the two hundred thousand dollars would be offered them, they signified a willingness to give it due consideration, and delay their final decision until the next day, but, instead, they came to a decision which barred the interested parties from presenting their subscription.

“The memorialists presented several witnesses on whose testimony they relied to show that a property worth fifty thousand dollars was given the Commissioners as a bribe, or bonus, or gratuity, but the witnesses refused to answer interrogatories put to them, by which only it could be proved that all of the Commissioners could be positively identified with fraud and corruption, was withheld, and it was not in the power of your Committee to bring it out.

“It appears, from the testimony, that two hundred and fifty lots were set apart on the east side of the river to influence the location of the Capitol; that town lots, or interests in town lots, were given to effect the location; that Pegram was bribed; that Baldwin was the go-between with Pegram, if not more of the Commissioners, and the proprietors of land on both sides of the river; that he appeared to have Pegram, if not a majority of the Commissioners, for sale to the highest bidder. There is nothing in the testimony implicating Commissioner Goodrell in the frauds alleged in the second charge.”

The Committee recommended that the Attorney General be instructed to institute proceedings for recovery of any bonuses the Commissioners had received for locating the Capitol, as such bonus should have been for the state, and not for the Commissioners.

The report was referred to a committee—and is there yet.

In May, under the new charter, Wiley was again elected to the City Council, to represent the Third Ward. It was an important period in municipal affairs, as the whole system of civil government had to be reorganized to meet the changed conditions.

In 1867, he was elected Street Commissioner. The streets were mere dirt roads, though much cutting and grading was being done, and plank sidewalks were laid on some of the streets below Fifth. Cows ran at large, and when they wanted a change from grazing on vacant lots, they made a raid on gardens and the sleds and wagons of farmers, usually, unless there was a good dog on guard, leaving only the box.

That was the end of office-holding for Wiley. He then turned his attention to trading and speculating, but retained an interest in public affairs.

Politically, he was a Whig. He voted for William Henry Harrison for President in 1840. In 1854, he joined the Know-Nothing Party, which elected Grimes for Governor, and put an end to Democratic rule in Iowa. He says he wants to live to vote for Roosevelt in 1908. He is now living in South Dakota.

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