

Chapter 4

Iowa in 1846: Context for the Trail

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THE FAMOUS AUTHOR, Bernard DeVoto, called 1846 “The Year of Decision,” and wrote a well-known book with that title. It was certainly a year in which many momentous events took place, on international and national levels, and also in Iowa. A simple time line of the year shows a vast number of events and people with which historians, as well as the general public, are familiar.

James Knox Polk was elected President of the United States in 1844 and was inaugurated in 1845. He defeated the Whig candidate, Henry Clay. Polk is important to Iowa because he was the President who signed the bill authorizing the entry of Iowa as a state in the United States.

National political issues were important in the congressional debate on the entry of Iowa to the Union. Slavery was a hot issue of the day, particularly regarding whether or not the institution of slavery would be allowed to extend, legally, into new territories. The custom of admitting two states at the same time, one which legally allowed slavery and another which did not, was followed in the case of Iowa, which was paired with Florida. This maintained the voting balance in the United States Senate.

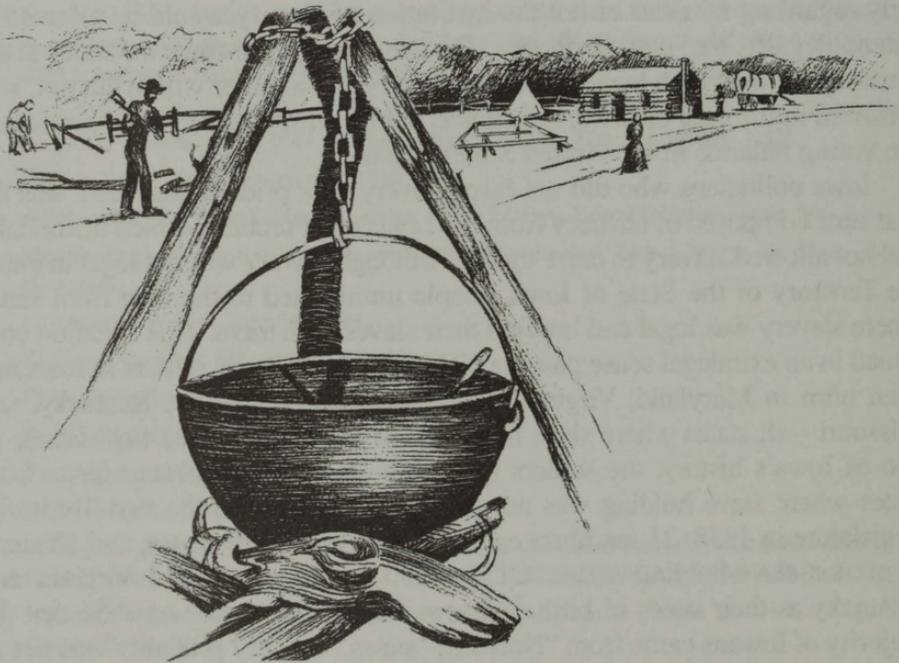
Iowa politicians who did not favor slavery took pride in that Iowa was the first state composed of territory from the Louisiana Purchase, which historically had not allowed slavery to exist legally. Although slavery was not legal in either the Territory or the State of Iowa, people immigrated to the area from states where slavery was legal and brought their slaves with them. This situation continued in an extralegal sense past the 1846 date. Many early settlers in Iowa had been born in Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri—all states where slave holding was legal. During the first decade or two of Iowa’s history, the settlers from these states outnumbered those from states where slave holding was not legal. For instance, in the first Territorial Legislature in 1838, 21 members came from slave-holding states, and 18 came from non-slave-holding states. Of the 18, seventeen counted Virginia and Kentucky as their states of birth. It was not until the election of 1854 that the majority of Iowans came from “Northern” states.¹ Slavery probably was not as much a local issue in Iowa as it was a national issue that carried down to the state in the form of platform planks in national political platforms.

Efforts to move Iowa from territorial to state status began in 1839, when the Territorial Governor, Robert Lucas, sent a message to the legislature urging the calling of a constitutional convention.² These efforts continued in 1840, when the Legislative Assembly called for a vote of the people on this question. The proposition for a constitutional convention was defeated by a vote of 937 in favor and 2,907 against.³

The second Territorial Governor of Iowa, John Chambers, continued as his predecessor had. His message in 1841 renewed the suggestion for the Legislative Assembly to call for a popular referendum on the subject. This was done in 1842, but again the proposition was defeated, this time by a vote of 4,129 in favor and 6,825 against. All seventeen counties returned majorities against calling a constitutional convention.⁴

While the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were moving from Ohio to Missouri, and then to Illinois, enduring persecutions in each successive place, the people in the area that became Iowa were endeavoring to identify their political futures. These efforts continued in 1843, 1844, and 1845. A constitutional convention met in October 1844 and framed a document. Disputes between Iowa and the federal government about boundaries led to a rejection of that constitution.⁵

In December 1845, the third Territorial Governor, James Clarke, urged the Legislative Assembly to authorize another convention to draft a constitu-



As Iowans debated whether or not to form a state, the Mormons were scattered across the length of southern Iowa.

tion. This was done in January 1846, and that convention met in Iowa City from May 4 to 19 that year. A constitution was drafted by a group of 32 men, of whom 13 were farmers, 7 were lawyers, and the rest were from a variety of other occupations. This document eventually served as the first constitution of the State of Iowa.⁶

Events moved rapidly after that time, and the referendum was approved on August 3, 1846. Governor James Clarke issued a proclamation declaring the ratification and adoption of the new constitution on September 9; a general election was held on October 26; the General Assembly commenced meeting on November 30, and the Governor was inaugurated on December 3. All of this preceded the federal legislation, which was not signed by President Polk until December 28.⁷

By the time Iowa was admitted to the Union, the first exodus of Saints had long since departed from Nauvoo and had encamped at Winter Quarters, Nebraska, as well as at Kaneshville, Iowa, and in many similar camps on the Iowa side of the Missouri River. Perhaps it was the preoccupation of the Iowans with their efforts to become a state that enabled the Saints to cross Iowa with less persecution than they had encountered in previous places. Certainly, Territorial Governor James Clarke behaved better under the circumstances than the governors of Missouri and Illinois.

In 1846, the territorial census reported that there were 102,388 people living in Iowa, compared with 43,112 in the federal census of 1840. By 1850, the federal census reported 192,214 people. Mormons were a part of the 1846 and 1850 census figures. But a greater significance behind these numbers lies in the rapid population growth during those early years.

The Saints played a major role in determining road routes, and bridge, ford, and ferry locations throughout southern Iowa, and also in the political organization of Pottawattamie County, though not as early as 1846. The road routes, bridges, fords, and ferries were used by thousands of other settlers who moved into Iowa then, and later. These aids to transportation were also of immense value to travelers who were passing through Iowa on their way to Oregon and California.

Urbanization had not progressed very far in Iowa by 1846, even though the urban frontier had arrived at the same time, or even ahead of the agricultural frontier. Census figures show the largest city was Burlington at 4,082, followed by Dubuque at 3,108, Bloomington (now Muscatine) at 2,540, Keokuk at 2,478, Davenport at 1,848, Fort Madison at 1,509, and Iowa City at 1,250.

Latter-day Saints were not the only people traveling in Iowa in 1846. Many Irish, English, Scottish, Welsh, and Germans left Europe in 1846 because of poor harvests and crop failures, including the well-known potato famine in Ireland. Many of these people became Iowans. The foreign-born population increased from 20,969 in 1850 to 106,077 in 1860.⁸

In 1846, a treaty with the Native American Indians called the Pottawattamie Cession opened additional land in western Iowa to potential White settlement. It was the Pottawattamie Tribe that the Saints encountered during their journey from Mt. Pisgah to Kanesville.

A third federal land office opened in Iowa City on August 14 to supplement the sales in Dubuque and Burlington. Although 345,632 acres were put up for sale on November 30, 1846, only 4,162 acres were actually sold. Surveyor General George Wallace Jones complained about the scanty appropriations allotted to get deputy surveyors into the field. Mormons who settled temporarily at Garden Grove and Mt. Pisgah were beyond the limit of officially surveyed land. This meant that any sales transactions of improved land or buildings had to be done unofficially.

During 1846 there were only eleven newspapers published in Iowa, and some of them did not publish for the entire year. They were:

Territorial Gazette, Burlington

Hawk-Eye, Burlington

Gazette, Davenport

Miner's Express, Dubuque

Lee County Democrat, Fort Madison

Iowa Argus and Lee County Advertiser, Keokuk

Bloomington Herald, Bloomington (now Muscatine)

Iowa Standard, Iowa City

Iowa Capital Reporter, Iowa City

Des Moines Valley Whig, Keosauqua

Iowa Democrat and Des Moines Valley Intelligencer, Keosauqua

This gives us an idea of how the people in Iowa received their national news in 1846. The two major political parties, Democrats and Whigs, were well represented. The newspapers in Keokuk, Fort Madison, and Keosauqua were located in areas directly impacted by the exodus of the Saints from Nauvoo.

In addition to newspapers and official government documents, we may also learn about life in Iowa in 1846 from personal diaries, journals, and letters written by people who lived in the area or who were traveling through. The diaries, journals, and reminiscences of the Latter-day Saints are among the richest sources of information for southern Iowa. They are, however, of limited value for their references to the most populous areas of Iowa. There are also many diaries of non-Mormons, such as the "Almanac Diary of William Salter" of Burlington, who recorded on December 9, 1846, "Snow at night," and on December 17, "A very little snow at night," and on December 29, "Rain and prayer meeting at my house."⁹

We also know that on December 28, 1846, the sun rose at 6:55 a.m. and set at 5:09 p.m. On Saturday, April 25, 1846, there was an eclipse of the sun

that was partially visible in Iowa, although no newspaper, letter, or diary mentions it. And in an agricultural area it would have been important to know that peach and cherry trees commenced to bloom on May 2, 1846, but that apple trees did not bloom until May 8. In 1846, the mean temperature was 28.8 degrees above zero Fahrenheit, with a monthly high of 54 degrees and a monthly low of 6 degrees. Snowfall in December 1846 measured 2.3 inches.¹⁰

Many schools, mostly private, were available in Iowa in 1846. Some were operated by religious denominations, others by private entrepreneurs. Among the most notable were the Denmark Academy in Denmark, the Mechanic's Academy in Iowa City, the Female High School in Davenport, St. Mary's Female Academy and St. Raphael's Seminary in Dubuque, the Masonic College in Burlington, and the Collegiate Institute in Mt. Pleasant. This latter institution is the predecessor of Iowa Wesleyan College, still in existence. The others schools were very short-lived.

The Mexican War broke out in 1846 and impacted the exodus of the Saints in significant ways. The recruitment of the "Mormon Battalion" removed nearly 500 able-bodied men from the camps, but it also brought in needed money for the Saints to purchase supplies for the coming winter. Other men from Iowa also served in that war, and three Iowa counties are named after battles: Buena Vista, Cerro Gordo, and Palo Alto.

Some well-known Iowans were born in 1846: William F. Cody, later famous as "Buffalo Bill," was born in Scott County that year. So was Mary Eunice Harlan, eldest child of James and Ann Eliza Peck Harlan. She later married Robert Todd Lincoln, son of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln.

Patrick Breen and his family left Keokuk on April 5, 1846, to travel to California. This was well in advance of the Gold Rush. We would not remember the Breen family at all, were it not that they joined a larger party at Fort Bridger in July. The larger party, known in history as the Donner Party, was trapped in the high Sierra Mountains in November 1846, and their ensuing ordeal has become a famous frontier story.

Several important patents were issued in 1846 that would help Iowa's agricultural future. William F. Ketchum invented a mechanical reaper with driving wheels under the grain platform. J. Darling invented a toothed slat-carrying platform for threshes. Clinton Foster invented a mechanical reaper with a self-rake that swept the platform. Alexander Wilson invented a mechanical reaper with cutters that followed the undulations of the ground, independent of the motion of the horses. Andrew J. Cook invented a mechanical reaper with a revolving reel rake. All of these devices were a part of the technological revolution going on at the time. Means of transportation, communication, and manufacturing were undergoing great changes, and Iowans were able to take advantage of these new developments during the early stages of settlement.

Although the political and economic developments in Iowa in 1846 were very significant, we must not lose sight of the day-to-day life of the ordinary

people. For instance, Henry Short, who farmed near Mt. Pleasant, made this diary entry on December 28: "Our meal is getting low, and I will have to make a trip to the mill while this weather holds out."¹¹ Richard Bonson, a lead miner in Dubuque County, recorded on December 28: "Weighing for Gillam. Had Rob[er]t Waller here this evening. Very fine weather for season, like spring."¹² Nathan Isbell lived near Denmark in Lee County: "Bought Oliver's cashmere pantaloons, paid \$0.75 per yd."¹³

Jonathan F. Stratton, who lived in southeast Iowa, had daily entries for all months prior to December, but in December 1846 he made the following collective entry for that month: "This month [it was] pleasant for the season though cool and windy most of the time. No storm or rain or snow worth noting until the 31, when it commenced a moderate rain and froze, forming a sleet. Had a cow calve white heifer."¹⁴

G. W. Kincaid, who farmed near Bloomington, wrote to his mother in Ohio: "Times have been good for two months this winter, but produce is down again. . . . If you was here now you would see that Iowa could produce corn equal to Ohio."¹⁵ Mrs. Elisabeth Douglass Adams, who lived in Davenport, wrote to her sister in Ohio:

We came here last October on the very day those men were hung at Rock Island, just on the opposite side of the river, for the murder of Col. [George] Davenport. The murder was committed on a beautiful island on which he lived a half mile from us. We began housekeeping in November. And the winter has come and gone like a dream. Now the river is open again, and boats pass every day. I believe Brother R. wrote me that I should find soil alive with fleas and the houses with bedbugs, the land cursed with the overflowings of Popery in its abominations and Protestants in their depravity. I cannot tell what may be, but I have seen neither fleas nor bedbugs yet. And Protestants are, by their nature depraved here, I suppose—pretty much as they are all over the world. . . .¹⁶ [Mrs. Adams' husband was a Congregational minister.]

Ebenezer Alden, Jr., also a Congregational minister, wrote to his father in Massachusetts: "I spent Thanksgiving in Bloomington. I preached the first Thanksgiving sermon ever preached there. Two years ago I preached the first Thanksgiving sermon in Tipton." In another letter, Alden wrote: "Had spare ribs for dinner today, and Mr. Gillet bought 5 of them yesterday for 13 cents. This will show you how much danger there is of our starving here."¹⁷ Territorial Governor James Clarke issued a proclamation on November 6, 1846, on that same subject, Thanksgiving:

Conformably to the request of many highly respectable persons belonging to the several religious denominations of the territory, and in obedience to a venerable and generally approved usage, I hereby name Thursday, the 26th day of November, inst., as a day of general Thanksgiving throughout Iowa and recommend that it be celebrated by prayer, humiliation [sic], and abstinence from secular employment.¹⁸

These modest and routine entries from diaries and letters are very important to any understanding of what life was like in 1846. People were attending to the business of making a living. They were concerned with food, clothing, housing, health, weather, getting from place to place, and with rites of passage. No doubt there was talk about politics, but these few examples do not seem to dominate over that of making a living.

The diaries and journals of the Saints contain vivid descriptions of the hardships of travel and camp life, but there are also many entries about food, clothing, and what they did in their spare time. To understand life in Iowa in 1846, we must think about all of these factors. "In the evening Elder [Heber C.] Kimball came over, and the band met opposite [Jacob] Hutchinson's wagon and played some. After that the Quadrille Band met in my tent and played on the violins."¹⁹ "Rain'd some in the night, but colder before morning—quite windy—Our tent blew down & with other accidents upset a pail of potato soup, which was intended for breakfast, but instead thereof we had coffee, fried jole, and jonny cake."²⁰ "Game is now quite plentiful. Our hunters bring into camp more or less deer, wild turkey, and prairie hens every day."²¹ "John has killed 6 turkeys this week."²² "Many have been strawberrying. Brother [Jacob] Hutchinson gave me some."²³ "The mud and water in and around our tents were ankle deep, and the rain still continued to pour down without any cessation. We were obliged to cut brush and limbs of trees and throw them upon the ground in our tents, to keep our beds from sinking in the mire."²⁴ "The road was the worst that I had yet witnessed, up hill & down through the sloughs on spouty oak ridges and deep marshes, raining hard, the creek rising, the horses would sometimes sink to their bellies. On the ridges, teams stall going down hill."²⁵ "Many of the wagons with families in them stayed on the prairie over night, and wet and cold they were, having no fire or any material with which to build one."²⁶ "I rose this morning, the sun shining with splendor, which gladdens our hearts. Our wagon cover is frozen hard, and the mud and water a little frozen. Froze our shoes in the tent."²⁷ "The camp was very uncomfortable, yet not a murmur was heard."²⁸

Lots of things happened in 1846. Lots of things were available to people in 1846. Like most other years, there were successes and failures, good and bad, people who got where they wanted to go and did the things they wanted to do, and people who didn't. The year is remembered because it is the time of a major rite of passage for the State of Iowa politically. It came of age, in a sense, in 1846, by joining the United States as a full-fledged state, an equal to all the other states, even those legendary "first 13," which had been colonies.

But while we may relish all of that, we must remember that in the final referendum on the constitution and statehood, 9,492 people voted in favor of that step, but 9,036 voted against it—hardly a landslide. As we think about the achievements of the winners, we should spend a moment or two on the thoughts and motivations of the losers. And we must certainly spend more than a moment or two in consideration of the thousands of Latter-day Saints

who crossed southern Iowa after their forced exodus from their homes in Nauvoo. Their contributions to Iowa have not been given proper recognition in the past. This volume is an attempt to rectify that omission.

The year 1846 was a year of decision. It was a momentous year for many people and for many reasons. Iowa became a state. The Mormons crossed Iowa on their journey towards Zion. Many immigrants moved into Iowa from eastern states and from Europe. It is a seminal year in the history of Iowa, and to understand the rest of the story we have to understand 1846.

NOTES

1. John Burrows, "The Early History of Iowa," *The Annals of Iowa* 7 (First Series, October 1869), 4:322-24.
2. Benjamin F. Shambaugh, ed., *Executive Journal of Iowa, 1838-1841* (Iowa City, IA: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1906), 179, cited hereafter as *Executive Journal of Iowa*.
3. *Executive Journal of Iowa*, 250-51. See also *Journal of the House of Representatives*, extra session, 1840; Benjamin F. Shambaugh, *The Constitutions of Iowa* (Iowa City, IA: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1934), 103-4, cited hereafter as *Constitutions of Iowa*; and *Iowa Standard*, November 27, 1840.
4. Benjamin F. Shambaugh, ed., *Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Iowa*, 8 vols. (Iowa City, IA: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1903), 1:252, cited hereafter as *Governors of Iowa*. See also *Journal of the Council*, 1841, 10; *Constitutions of Iowa*, 106-7; *Iowa Standard*, September 10, 1842; John A. T. Hull, *Census of Iowa for 1880, and the Same Compared with the Findings of Each of the Other States, and Also with All Former Enumerations of the Territory Now Embraced Within the Limits of the State of Iowa, with Other Historical and Statistical Data* (Des Moines, IA: F. M. Mills, State Printers and George E. Roberts, State Printer, 1883), ix, cited hereafter as *Iowa Census*; and James Alton James, *Constitution and Admission of Iowa into the Union*, Herbert B. Adams, ed., reprint (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1973 [1900]), 15.
5. *Governors of Iowa*, 271, 278, 308-9. See also *Iowa Census*, ix-x; Stephen M. McCarthy, "Governmental Administration and Political Developments in Iowa, 1836-1848," Master's thesis, Drake University, 1972, 80-81; and *Iowa Standard*, May 16, 1844.
6. *Governors of Iowa*, 319. See also *Constitutions of Iowa*, 189-90, 199, 209-10; *Iowa Census*, xi; and *Bloomington Herald*, September 11, 1846.
7. *Governors of Iowa*, 330-31, 358-60. See also *Iowa Standard*, November 11, 1846; *Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Iowa* (January term, 1846), 634-49; *Acts and Resolutions Passed at the First Session of the General Assembly of the State of Iowa* (Iowa City, IA: A. H. Palmer, Printer, 1847), 199-201; and *Laws of Iowa* (Iowa City, IA: A. H. and G. D. Palmer, Printers, 1846), 2-3, 8.
8. Loren N. Horton, *Census Data for Iowa* (Iowa City, IA: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1973), 3-4. See also Rowene T. Ogert, Helen M. Blumhagen, and Wilma Adkins, *The 1840 Iowa Census* (Salt Lake City, UT: n.p., 1968).
9. Walter Salter, "Almanac Diary of William Salter," December 9, 17, and 29, 1846, State Historical Society of Iowa.
10. *The American Almanac and Repository of Useful Knowledge for the Year 1846* (Boston, MA: James Munroe and Company, 1846), 32-34, 85.

11. Henry Short Diary, December 28, 1846, State Historical Society of Iowa.
12. Richard Bonson Diary, December 28, 1846, State Historical Society of Iowa.
13. Nathan Isbell Diary, December 27, 1846, State Historical Society of Iowa.
14. Jonathan F. Stratton Diary, December 1846, State Historical Society of Iowa.
15. G. W. Kincaid letter to his mother, March 1, 1846, State Historical Society of Iowa.
16. Elisabeth Douglass Adams letter to her sister, Emeline M. Robinson, November 1846, State Historical Society of Iowa.
17. Ebenezer Alden, Jr., letters to his father, Ebenezer Alden, November and February 1846, State Historical Society of Iowa.
18. *Governors of Iowa*, 361.
19. William Clayton, *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton*, George D. Smith, ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books and Smith Research Associates, 1995), April 6, 1846.
20. Eliza R. Snow Diaries, March 13, 1846, LDS Church Archives.
21. Orson Pratt, *The Orson Pratt Journals*, Elden J. Watson, ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Elden J. Watson, 1975), March 23, 1846, cited hereafter as Orson Pratt Diary.
22. William Huntington Journal, typescript, April 18, 1846, Lands and Records Office, Nauvoo LDS Visitor's Center.
23. Patty Bartlett Sessions, "Day by Day Diary," typescript, June 18, 1846, Lands and Records Office, Nauvoo LDS Visitor's Center, cited hereafter as Patty Sessions Diary.
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25. Juanita Brooks, ed., *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout, 1844-1861*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press and Utah State Historical Society, 1964), April 6, 1846.
26. George A. Smith Diary, April 9, 1846, LDS Church Archives.
27. Patty Sessions Diary, April 5, 1846.
28. Willard Richards Diaries, typescript, April 3, 1846, LDS Church Archives.