

HARRISON LYON

A conspicuous personage in the early days of the county, and one of the most portentous boosters of Des Moines, was Harrison Lyon.

Born in Madison, Jefferson County, Indiana, October Sixteenth, 1811, he passed the years of his youth with his parents, his father, Jonathan Lyon, having settled there at an early day, when Southern Indiana was a wilderness. Subsequently, he removed to Washington County, and, being an enterprising, active man, was soon recognized by the people as suitable to take charge of public affairs, and was elected Clerk of the District Court. He served through several terms with marked ability, and to the satisfaction of the public and his many friends. He was also an active business man, and became one of the wealthiest of the county.

Harrison, during his minority, acquired the best education the common schools of that day afforded. Arriving at manhood, he engaged in farming and milling, and, like his father, soon became another of the leading men of the county.

In 1851, he disposed of all his property there and came to Fort Des Moines. It was the year, says Leonard Brown, the poet laureate of that day, which

“Brought the mighty flood of water—
When poured down the floods from heaven
Till the river was a mammoth,
Swallowing all the vegetation,
Trees and everything before it—
Reaching over all the bottoms—
Climbing higher up the hillsides
Than it ever had before climbed—
Moving with tremendous fury,
Irresistible and vengeful.”

The East Side bottoms were strewn with debris, uprooted trees, wrecks of houses, and farm implements. The landscape was not very attractive to a stranger seeking a new home, but his good sense and business sagacity prompted him to stay. Selecting the highest point he could find, for safety from inundation, he purchased of Benjamin Coffeen four hundred acres, on part, of which now stands the Capitol and State Historical Building. The land was covered with timber and underbrush so dense it was nearly impossible to get through it—in fact, a party of young women, in attempting to do so, got lost and wandered helplessly about for several hours, until rescued by anxious, searching friends, who found them where what is now Franklin Park, then a slough and frog pond, and favorite resting-place and feeding-ground for wild ducks when making their migratory flights north and south.

There were but two or three log cabins on the bottoms on the east side of the river—the bottoms being divided into farms—and Lyon rented a small house on the West Side. He then cleared a space on his land near what is now the corner of East Thirteenth and Walker, and built a log cabin, in which he made his home.

In 1853, he cleared another part of his four hundred acres, where the Capitol stands, and at a point, near the northwest corner of the present edifice, erected a fine cottage for himself and family, intending it to be his future home.

When he came here, the removal of the Capitol of the state to a more central location was a topic of general discussion. The General Assembly took up the subject, when immediately arose an intense rivalry between Fort Des Moines, Oskaloosa, Marshalltown, Cedar Rapids, and other localities. The question hung fire through four sessions of the General Assembly, but through the influence and persistent effort of Judge Casady, Colonel "Tom" Baker, Doctor A. Y. Hull, "Uncle Jimmy" Jordan, Alfred M. Lyon, Doctor W. P. Davis, representatives in the General Assembly from Polk County; Barlow Granger, Hoyt Sherman, Colonel J. M. Griffith, "Uncle Tommy" Mitchell, R. L. Tidrick, and other citizens, Polk County was selected, in January, 1855. In the meantime, a strife arose as to where in the county the site was to be. Doctor T. K. Brooks had started a town about two miles east of The Fort,

"Uncle Jerry" Church another farther down the river, and John Saylor had his booming town of Saylorville, all expectant rivals. They had secured the insertion in the law of a clause that the site for the Seat of Government "be within two miles of the junction of Des Moines and Raccoon rivers." That let in Doctor Brooks and "Uncle Jerry" with their embryo cities. Commissioners were appointed by the General Assembly to make the selection of a site. The Commissioners delayed their coming several months, and before their arrival, Brooks and "Uncle Jerry" withdrew from the contest, which left it to the east and west sides of the Des Moines River. Then arose a contest which was vigorous, bitter and acrimonious, engendering a strife which continued for more than forty years.

Harrison Lyon, as an inducement to locate the Capitol on the East Side, offered to donate ten acres, Doctor Brooks and W. A. Scott offered another tract which is now known as Governor's Square, as a site for the Governor's mansion.

Colonel J. A. Williamson and T. A. Walker offered another tract, on East Walker Street, known as State Square.

W. A. Scott, or Alex., as everybody called him, offered another tract of forty acres, which embraced a part of the south half of the Capitol Grounds, and the block whereon is now the Soldiers' Monument, and further agreed to erect a State House and donate it to the state.

The East Side won, and so soon as the site was fixed, deeds were made April Twenty-ninth, 1856, and recorded for the four several tracts. A Building Association was formed by Scott, who was the prime mover, a three-story substantial brick building was erected, which, for twenty years, during the most notable epoch in the history of the state, was occupied by the state officers, Supreme Court, and General Assembly. Around its walls cluster memories of heart-stirring scenes and notable events. When the new Capitol was ready for occupancy, the old was left to the elements, tramps and bats, until it went up in flames.

In May, 1856. Lyon having given to the state his cottage-home grounds, an exceedingly liberal, seldom equaled, donation, he platted forty acres,

making wide streets and alleys, which is now known as Lyon's Addition to the city, and in 1857, built a large, two-story frame house on the south half of Block Five, on Keokuk Street (now Grand Avenue), which for many years was known as the Lyon homestead. He surrounded it with trees and shrubbery, and it was deemed one of the finest residences on the east side of the river. In 1896, the entire half block was sold to the state, the house moved to East Twelfth Street, and is now occupied by two of his daughters. On the old site stands the State Historical Building, which my good friend, Charles Aldrich, thinks is the best thing on earth.

Very soon after his arrival, Lyon, in addition to the four hundred acres purchased of Coffeen, bought six hundred and forty near where the State Fair Grounds are, two hundred on what is now West Grand Avenue, where are the finest residences in the city, and several hundred acres near Sioux City. Such was his judgment and perspicacity, he never made a mistake in an investment. He was a keen observer of human nature and passing events. Nothing escaped his observation. A close reader of the world's doings, he was always posted on public affairs of his own country.

Socially, he was of quiet demeanor, affable, genial in temperament, companionable, a good neighbor, public-spirited, liberal, ever ready to render aid to all laudable enterprises. Besides his generous donation to the state, he gave the lots and built, at Ninth and Grand Avenue, the first schoolhouse on the East Side. In that schoolhouse was organized the first Class of the Methodist Church, known as Wesley Chapel, and the Reverend E. M. H. Fleming, then of the Monroe Circuit, preached therein.

During the war period, Lyon contributed largely to the soldiers' relief fund, to furnish supplies for the "boys in blue," and was one of their most active and zealous supporters. He was loved and respected by all who knew him. Though his name is not yet emblazoned on lofty and costly edifices, it is indelibly impressed on the foundation stones, the school, the church, the home, upon which a civic structure has been built, ennobling and attractive.

Religiously, he was not a churchman, but in 1857, he donated a lot and contributed liberally to the funds for building the First Methodist Church, on

the East Side, for many years known as Wesley Chapel, of which his wife was an active and beloved member.

Politically, Lyon was a firm disciple of General Andrew Jackson, but took no part in politics. If he voted at all, it was the Democratic ticket, but after 1859, Democratic votes didn't avail anything in Polk County.

He deceased March 20, 1885.

March Third, 1907.