

## Memoir of Col. William G. Coop

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# ANNALS OF IOWA.



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## MEMOIR OF COL. WILLIAM G. COOP.

BY A. R. FULTON.

**T**HERE are still living in Iowa many persons to whom the name of the subject of this sketch will appear familiar, and especially among those who were identified with the politics of the Territory, and of the State in its infancy. It is the name of one who was, by nature and training, adapted to take a leading part in laying the foundations of a young State, before the era of railroads and telegraphs. Nearly all his life had been passed upon the border up to the time when, at the age of thirty-three years, we find him honored by a pioneer constituency with official trust in the Territory, and representing that portion of it then upon the extreme border. He was one of those, who, while contending with the difficulties and privations of pioneer life, rendered important service in planting the foundations of a grand and noble State. A brief sketch of such an actor in early Iowa is eminently deserving of a few pages in the record of her pioneer legislators.

Col. William G. Coop was born in Greene county, Virginia, February 26th, 1805. While yet a child, he removed

with his parents to Tennessee; thence to Washington county, Pennsylvania, where they resided about two years, when they removed to Wabash county, Indiana. In 1830 the family again joined the tide of emigration flowing westward, and this time settled in Macoupin county, Illinois. Young Coop had now grown to manhood, endowed with physical and mental qualities peculiarly fitting him for discharging the duties and contending with the hardships of a life on the frontier. Very soon after settling in Illinois, he contracted to deliver a lot of cattle to the military, at that time stationed at Green Bay. Having performed his contract to the satisfaction of the Government, he returned home, and for several terms filled the office of Sheriff of his county. In the meantime, the Black Hawk war came on, and the young Sheriff of Macoupin county was among the first to respond to the call of Governor Reynolds for volunteers to meet the hostile savages. He was elected Captain of a company, and soon after received from Governor Reynolds a commission as Colonel of a regiment of Illinois volunteers. Having served the country and his State with credit through that decisive campaign of 1832, which resulted in restoring peace with the Indians, he returned home, where he continued to discharge the duties of Sheriff of his county almost to the time of his removal to Iowa.

In the meantime, Col. Coop had married Miss Nancy Harris, a native of Lexington county, Kentucky, a lady in every way fitted to bear with him the burdens or share the duties and responsibilities incident to pioneer life. The Black Hawk war had resulted in opening a new territory for the pioneer, west of the Mississippi, and in 1833 settlements began in what was designated as the "Black Hawk Purchase." These infant settlements were at first confined to two or three points bordering upon the Mississippi, but gradually extended toward the western limits of the "Purchase." These newly-acquired possessions of the Government, it may be stated, were then included within the Territorial jurisdiction of Wisconsin. Up to the spring of 1836, the country embraced within the limits of Jefferson county was without white settlers, although the greater portion of it was included in the first, or "Black Hawk Purchase."

On the 6th day of June, 1836, Col. Coop and family, with their goods and chattels, arrived at a point about seven miles east of the site of the present city of Fairfield, where they selected a location. During the same year some ten or twelve other families, also from Illinois, but most of them originally from Southern States, located in the same vicinity, forming the advance guard of what was soon to become a thriving frontier community. Col. Coop and wife were the parents of the first white child born in the territory now within the limits of Jefferson county. This event took place July 13th, 1836, and the son, William Henry Coop, enjoys the distinction of being the oldest native citizen of the county.

During the first year of his settlement, Col. Coop became the proprietor of the first town laid out in the county, which was located some seven miles east of where Fairfield now stands. He named it Lockridge, which name still survives in that of a prosperous station on the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad, a few miles further east. Col. Coop's town of Lockridge, however, passed away, when the county seat was located at Fairfield, in 1839. As early as 1836 a small store was established at Lockridge, where salt was sold at \$7 per bushel, and corn-meal, hauled by ox teams from Illinois, at \$1.25 per bushel. As illustrating the inconvenience of procuring supplies in those days, Joseph M. Parker, one of the pioneers of Col. Coop's settlement, once stated to the writer, that, in 1837, he made a trip to Rawl's Mill, on Crooked Creek, Schuyler county, Illinois, with an ox team, and was gone *twenty-seven days*, the distance being about one hundred miles.

Previous to July, 1836, the vast extent of country, now embraced in Wisconsin and Iowa, was under the jurisdiction of the then existing Territory of Michigan. At that date an act of Congress took effect creating the new Territory of Wisconsin, and this embraced Iowa, then sometimes called Western Wisconsin. On the 6th of November, 1837, a convention of delegates from Western Wisconsin met at Burlington for the purpose, among other things, of memorializing Congress for a separate Territorial organization. A memorial to this

effect was adopted, and Congress complied by the passage of an act creating the Territory of Iowa, which act took effect July 3d, 1838. The usual Territorial officers were appointed by the President, and confirmed by the Senate. The same act provided for the election by the people of a Territorial Legislative Assembly — a House of Representatives, consisting of twenty-six members, and a Council, of thirteen members. The organized counties at that time were Lee, Des Moines, Muscatine, Scott, Dubuque, Cedar, Louisa, Henry, and Van Buren. On the 10th of September, in accordance with a proclamation of Governor Lucas, an election was held for members of the first Territorial Legislative Assembly, which was to convene at Burlington, November 12th, 1838. At that time Henry county included the territory west to the boundary line of the "first purchase," embracing the greater portion of what is now Jefferson county. Col. Coop was one of the three members of the House elected from the county, or district, of Henry, his colleagues being William H. Wallace and Asbury B. Porter.

Here some facts relative to the *personnel* of this first Iowa legislative body may be of interest. Of the thirty-nine members, twenty-four were farmers, four lawyers, four merchants, two physicians, two surveyors, one gunsmith, one miner, and one a retired officer of the United States Army. This last was General Jesse B. Browne, the President of the Council. Twenty-one were natives of Southern States, and eighteen of Northern States. Two members subsequently became Governors of Iowa — Stephen Hempstead a member of the Council, and James W. Grimes a member of the House, then but twenty-two years of age. Others of these early Iowa legislators attained more or less distinction in the subsequent history of the Territory and State; but no other was called to serve so frequently and continuously in a legislative capacity as the subject of this sketch.

Among the acts passed by the first Legislative Assembly was one providing for the organization of Jefferson county and the location of its county seat. The new county, however, continued for another year attached to Henry in the formation

of a Representative district, and Col. Coop was elected a Representative to the Second Assembly, his colleagues being Jacob L. Myers and John B. Lash. This body convened at Burlington, November 4th, 1839, and a special session was held in July, 1840, for the purpose of making a new apportionment, the census of the Territory then showing its population to be 43,114. Before the election of members of the Third Assembly, the new county of Jefferson had been organized, and Col. Coop was elected from that county, but this time as a member of the Council. He was also elected to the Council of the Fourth Assembly, this being the first to convene at Iowa City. It met December 6th, 1841. After a brief retirement for two sessions, we find him returned to the Council of the Seventh Assembly, in 1845, from a district composed of the counties of Jefferson, Wapello, and Monroe, and again to the Council of the Eighth Assembly from the same district, this being the last session under the Territorial organization.

It will thus be seen that Col. Coop had the honor of sitting as a member in one or the other branch of the Territorial Legislature at six of the eight regular sessions, and one special session. During these years of Iowa's Territorial infancy were laid the foundations upon which the grand edifice of a noble State was to be erected. It was no trivial distinction conferred upon Col. Coop to be repeatedly called by the suffrages of his fellow pioneers to assist in this work, and clearly proves that he commanded the confidence of his fellow citizens. But his legislative services were not yet to be dispensed with.

In 1844 the Territory had attained a population of 75,152, and there was a desire to don the habiliments of a sovereign State. In October of this year, a convention held at Iowa City framed a constitution, which was submitted to Congress. This body passed an act in March, 1845, for the admission of Iowa as a State, but with boundaries quite different from those defined in the constitution which had been framed and proposed. As a result, this first work of a constitutional convention, with the change made by Congress, was rejected by

the people of the Territory at an election held August 4th, 1845.

A second constitutional convention was called, and of this Col. Coop was elected a member. It convened at Iowa City, May 4th, 1846, continued in session fifteen days, and framed the document which was the fundamental law of the State up to September 3d, 1857, when the present constitution went into effect. The people having ratified the constitution of 1846, under its provisions Iowa was admitted as a State, December 28th, of the same year. For a short time the subject of this sketch again retired to private life, but in July, 1852, he was again nominated by his party for a seat in the State Senate. Jefferson county at that time being entitled to two Senators, his associate on the Democratic ticket was Dr. S. L. Ramage, of Fairfield. Their competitors on the Whig ticket were Col. John Park and Thos. O. Wamsley, both farmers. The result was the election of Col. Coop and Col. Park—a Democrat and a Whig. The two political parties in Jefferson county at that time seem to have been very nearly equally divided. Both of the successful candidates received the same aggregate vote—761. Col. Coop had only five votes more than his defeated Democratic associate, Ramage, and seven more than the defeated Whig candidate, Wamsley.

In the Senate of the Fourth General Assembly, Col. Coop was assigned the chairmanship of the Committee on Agriculture, and was also a member of two other standing committees—Military Affairs, and County Boundaries. He was also appointed chairman of a special committee on University Lands. One of his first acts at this session was to introduce a resolution, which was adopted, instructing the Committee on Roads to inquire into the expediency of repealing that part of the Code relating to labor on roads, and establishing in lieu thereof the old “district system.” He introduced a number of important bills during the session, some of which became laws. At the next session, which convened at Iowa City, December 4th, 1854, he was again made chairman of the Committee on Agriculture, and assigned a membership in the committees on Federal Relations and Public Lands—

all of which, at that time, were very important committees. He was also a member of several special committees, one being a special committee to consider the question of relocating the county seat of Keokuk county. At this session the question of prohibiting the manufacture and sale of intoxicating liquors was a prominent and exciting subject of legislation. The bill finally passed the Senate by the very decisive vote of twenty-three yeas to eight nays. Col. Coop's name is recorded among the negatives on this question. During this session, on his motion, the bill for the appointment of a Supreme Court Reporter was indefinitely postponed. He also opposed the bill for a State geological survey, which, however, was passed at that session. He introduced a joint resolution instructing Senators, and requesting Representatives in Congress from Iowa, to use their influence against the renewal of expired patents on reaping and mowing machines. Among the bills he introduced were the following: Defining a standard weight for a bushel of coal; to amend the Code in relation to roads, and a bill to establish an agricultural bureau at the capital of the State, and defining the powers and duties of its officers. This bill passed the Senate. During the special session of this General Assembly, in July, 1856, he retained his position on the committees, as at the regular session. Early in the special session he introduced a concurrent resolution for a special committee of three to act in conjunction with a like committee of the House upon so much of the Governor's message as related to the Des Moines River Improvement, and that such joint committee have power of investigation and conference with the officers of the Des Moines Navigation and Railroad Company, and report what legislation might be necessary for the interests of the State. This resolution was adopted, and the mover was made one of the members of the committee. It led to a pretty thorough investigation of the management of that early Iowa enterprise—the Des Moines River Improvement.

Owing to the revolution in political parties, which took place in Iowa about this time, Col. Coop's service in the special session of 1856 terminated his legislative and official



career. But being still the most popular leader of his party in the county, he was again brought forward by the Democrats for a seat in the convention which framed the present State constitution. The Republican party, however, which had, in the meantime, been organized, had a rising young politician, and future statesman, in the person of James F. Wilson, who was brought forward against the Democratic veteran, who up to that time, had never experienced defeat. Mr. Wilson was elected by a decisive majority, but no other Democratic opponent, at that time, could have received a stronger vote than Col. Coop received. After this contest he retired from the field of active party politics, to find greater profit, if not more genuine pleasure, in the quiet cultivation of his splendid farm a few miles north of Fairfield.

Col. Coop was not a fluent and ready debater, but could express his ideas in a practical and common-sense way. As a legislator, he was always present in his seat, and ready to vote on all questions, no doubt as his conscience dictated to be right. His party fealty was strong, being a Democrat in the strictest sense, but he was always faithful to his constituency, and honest in the discharge of his public and official duties. In social life he was highly esteemed by all who had the pleasure of his acquaintance. He was a plain, unassuming farmer at home, but commanded the respect of all, as a man of practical good sense and agreeable bearing in his intercourse with his fellowmen—political opponents, as well as friends. In person he was tall, of dark complexion, commanding presence, and easy manners.

Col. William G. Coop died at his home, in Jefferson county, lamented by all, June 4th, 1874, at the age of sixty-nine years, having passed thirty-eight of them in Iowa. His wife survived him but a short time. They were the parents of a family of fourteen children—six sons and eight daughters—most of whom are still living.

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THE great Junius said he never knew a rogue who was not unhappy. Of course not. It is the rogues who are not known who are the happy ones.

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