

General John Edwards

ISSN 0003-4827



Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.

This work has been identified with a [Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0](#).

Recommended Citation

"General John Edwards." *The Annals of Iowa* 1870 (1870), 376-381.

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol1870/iss4/13>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

GENERAL JOHN EDWARDS.

We present in this number a portrait of General John Edwards, whose countenance will at once be recognized by many of our readers who account themselves as elder citizens of Iowa.

He was born, October 24, 1815, in Jefferson county, Kentucky, almost within the present boundaries of the city of Louisville, and near the childhood home of old Zack Taylor, twelfth President of the United States, and is at this writing just fifty-five years old. His father, whose name was also plain John Edwards, was one of the earliest pioneers of Louisville's immediate vicinity, and had acquired, before he of whom we write was born, a large and valuable tract of land, part of which is embraced in what is now the suburbs of that pleasant city, and extending from Bear Grass creek for several miles on the Lexington road.

Besides his domain near Louisville, the elder Edwards owned a large extent of rich bottom land in Lawrence county, Indiana, near what is now Lawrenceport, near White river, which he gave to the subject of our sketch when the latter had attained his eighteenth year, and had acquired such education as the schools of Louisville then afforded, on condition that he should occupy and improve it. These terms were gladly acceded to by the son, who, even at that early age, had discovered a prejudice against slavery, and longed to begin his career under the auspices of impartial freedom, but soon after found himself captured and bound by Cupid, who, at that remote period, had already forced his way to the banks of White river. The upshot of this was, that young Edwards, shortly after his removal to Indiana, was wed to Miss Eliza, daughter of Marcus Knight, who had immigrated there with his family from Kentucky, and was an early pioneer of Lawrence county.

Soon after his marriage, General Edwards removed to Bedford, the seat of justice of Lawrence county, and for several

years was engaged in the shipment of cattle and produce, by flat-boat to New Orleans, after the manner of "Honest Old Abe." Finding it unprofitable to carry on his farm and live at the county seat, he soon after removed to Lawrenceport, within one mile of his farm, where he resided till 1849, carrying on his trade in grain and stock by boating from his farm to New Orleans.

In 1849, he took four young men (two of whom had served him faithfully on his farm), fitted them out, and went with them to California, where he arrived with the first ox-train that reached the El Dorado that year. His first stopping place, with a view to mining, was Nevada Gulch, where he had remained but a short time when the miners of his district elected him to the *Alcalde*. He was one of the founders of Nevada City, and built the first hotel in that place, in co-partnership with a lawyer from Illinois named Ellis. This hotel, with the whole town, was shortly afterwards destroyed by fire, and General Edwards barely escaped with his life, the clothes on his back and five dollars, all else that he had brought to or acquired in California being consumed in the flames.

He remained in California, performing the functions of a judge, or in law practice with his partner, Ellis, until 1852, when he was called home to Indiana by the illness of his wife, whose precarious state of health forbid his returning to the "Golden State," as he had intended.

The same year that he returned from California, the whig party in Lawrence county nominated him for the state senate, against Gen. Ben Newland, and notwithstanding a democratic majority of three hundred in the county, he was triumphantly elected over his opponent by a handsome majority. But this was no great feat for Edwards to perform; for he had, previously to going to California, been elected to the lower branch of the Indiana legislature, as a whig, in the face of a strong majority of the opposite party. It must be recollected that "Harry of the West" held sway in those days in Kentucky, and the great majority of the politicians

hailing from the land of Boone, were of the same political faith as the great orator of Ashland. It is, therefore, by no means surprising that General Edwards began his political life as a whig, as was his father before him.

At the death of General Edwards's father, which occurred in 1840, in the distribution of his many slaves among his children, he bequeathed, in his will, a family consisting of a favorite man-servant, his wife and several children, to his son John. But General Edwards had lived too long in a commonwealth of universal freedom to accept such a legacy for his own benefit. He therefore took his slaves to Indiana, emancipated them, and made liberal provision for them for life. As before stated, he entertained an aversion for slavery in his youth, which ripened into hatred from seeing the enormities and brutalities of the "peculiar institution" on his boating trips to the more distant south, on each return from which he would implore his father, by letter or orally, to manumit his slaves.

In 1853, General Edwards removed from Indiana to Iowa, and established his home at Chariton, in Lucas county, and in 1856 was elected to represent the ninth senatorial district (embracing Lucas county) in the constitutional convention, which met in Iowa City, January 19, 1857, to frame the benign constitution under which the happy people of Iowa are even unto this day panoplied.

As a member of the constitutional convention, he took a prominent and leading part in framing the present organic law of our state, serving as chairman of the committee "On right of suffrage." There was, perhaps, no subject considered by the convention which elicited so much, and such angry, debate as that assigned to this committee; for it opened the whole question of African slavery from the establishment of the federal government to the middle of the present century. In all these debates General Edwards was an eloquent participant, in favor of the most liberal and judicious measures which in that dark, though so recent, age could be projected to pave the way toward impartial suffrage, and in the course

of one of his speeches making the following prediction, which has since been fully verified: —

“I have hoped, and I hope yet, the day will come when the fetters shall be stricken from all this unfortunate race. Aye, and the day will come, as sure as there is a just God in heaven. And the unfortunate colored man, who was stolen from his native land, and is now suffering under the yoke of oppression and bondage, will some day receive justice, and when that justice is meted out to him, heaven grant that this nation does not suffer.”

General Edwards also served three terms in the legislature of Iowa, and was Speaker of the House of Representatives at the breaking out of the rebellion.

It was while a member of the Iowa legislature that he received from the democratic members and press the *sobriquet* of “Honest John.” It occurred on account of a charge made by him of ten or fifteen dollars for examining into the school fund of three counties, and representing to the legislature the condition of the same, while the most of those appointed to perform the same service for other counties, had charged the state from fifty to a hundred dollars, and in some instances more.

In June, 1861, General Edwards's military career began, by his receiving a commission as *aid-de-camp* to Governor Kirkwood, with the rank of lieutenant-colonel, the first appointment of the kind which was made, and under which his chief duties were to keep the rebels on the southern borders of Iowa in subjection. This he did pretty effectually, twice marching his troops far beyond the northern boundary of Missouri, through nests of armed revolvers. So well did he perform this difficult task, that, a year later, Governor Kirkwood made him a full colonel, and gave him command of the eighteenth Iowa infantry. His service as colonel of this gallant regiment was mostly performed in Missouri, where he rendered valuable assistance to the Union cause in many minor actions, and conspicuously distinguished himself for courage and good generalship at the battle of Springfield.

Here, with his own regiment, three companies of raw Missouri militia, and a few score of sick, altogether aggregating less than a thousand men, he utterly routed and completely foiled the rebel General Marmaduke, who, with a force more than double that under Edwards, had come to take the town. In August, 1863, while still colonel of the eighteenth, he was assigned to the command of a district in Missouri, and the following October marched into Arkansas and captured Fort Smith, which, before the war, had been selected on account of its strength as a United States military post. It was now, by a field order, re-established as a post, the command of which was assigned to General Edwards, as a mark of approval for his gallantry in capturing it. Commanding a brigade, he took a valiant part in many of the affairs fought in Arkansas, in 1864, including the battles of Prairie d' Anne, Camden, and Saline river; in recognition of which he was promoted by the president to the rank of brigadier general.

In military administration, as in civil service, he was characterized by stern integrity and strict justice, that left no room for suspicion of a weakness for cotton, which, during the rebellion, sullied the escutcheons of so many of our military commanders. While just to the government he served, it is an evidence of the leniency he accorded the conquered who found themselves under martial law as administered by him, that, at the close of the war, after retiring from the army, he made his home at Fort Smith, Arkansas (a town he had captured and commanded), where he still resides—secure and respected as an unarmed citizen among those he had subdued, where, while surrounded by body-guards and regiments, his life was in danger from the cotton-thieves and speculators he had warned and forbidden.

The war being over, President Johnson appointed him a revenue assessor for the district including Fort Smith, which office he relinquished on the accession of the present federal administration. As before stated, he is still a resident of Fort Smith, which forms a part of the third congressional district of Arkansas, and, true to those instincts of independ-

ence and patriotism which have caused him formerly to be denounced in the place of his nativity, by his fire-eating relatives, as an *abolitionist*, and more recently by the extremists of the dominant party as a *conservative*, he is now canvassing his district as an independent candidate for congress.

In person, General Edwards is of medium size, warm and genial in manner, with a pleasing cast of features, which, we regret to say, is not well portrayed in the engraving. He has a number of children, some of whom are happily married and settled in life. It is to his son, E. E. Edwards, of Chariton, Lucas county, and to his son-in-law, Dr. H. H. Maynard, of Tipton, formerly a surgeon of the eighteenth Iowa, but now the leading physician of Cedar county, that we are indebted for most of the facts relating to General Edwards's private life contained in this sketch.

PIONEERS OF MARION COUNTY.

BY WM. M. DONNELL.

(Continued from page 253.)

CHAPTER XIII.

LIST OF COUNTY TREASURERS. — THE STANFIELD DEFALCATION.
— ROBBERY OF THE TREASURY IN 1867.

The following is a list of county treasurers from the organization of the county till the present date, — 1870 : —

David T. Durham, elected September, 1845 ; re-elected August, 1846, and served till August, 1847. Isaac Walters, from August, 1847, to 1849, and re-elected from that until 1851. Claiborn Hall, 1852 and 1853. David Stanfield, 1854, 1855, 1856, and 1857. William Ellis, 1858, 1859, 1860, and

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.