

Theodore Sutton Parvin

1817-1901

Theodore Sutton Parvin was the firstborn son of Josiah H. Parvin and Lydia (Harris) Parvin.

Mr. Parvin began his life journey in Cedarville, New Jersey, on January 15, 1817. In 1829, at the age of 12, he moved with his parents and several siblings to Cincinnati, Ohio. His five New Jersey siblings were:

- 1818, Ruth Harris Parvin, who died at age one.
- 1820, another sister, also named Ruth Harris Parvin, lived to age 62.
- 1822, William Stratton Parvin, who died at age 11.
- 1825, Washington Lafayette Bolivar Jackson Parvin, who lived to marry and have children.
- 1827, Rhoda Eliza Parvin, who lived to marry.

After moving to Ohio in 1829, and settling in their new home in Cincinnati, Josiah and Lydia Parvin bore six more children, siblings of Theodore, but sadly none of them lived past infancy.

- 1830, Josiah Napoleon Bonaparte Parvin
- 1831, Lydia Amanda Parvin
- 1833, Josiah Franklin Parvin
- 1835, David Harris Parvin
- 1839, Cornelia Iowa Parvin
- 1841, Francis Maria Parvin

The firstborn son of this New Jersey (and then Ohio) family, Theodore Sutton Parvin, eventually made his way into the Iowa Territory via the state of Ohio.

After receiving his early childhood education in New Jersey, and his relocation to Cincinnati, he continued his education and graduated from Woodward High School in 1835. Immediately upon high school graduation, he was offered a position to teach mathematics in the Cincinnati Public Schools. In the following years, Mr. Parvin became a principal of the Third Ward School in Cincinnati. Also, during these years, he studied (or read as it was termed then) to become a lawyer, attending the Cincinnati Law School, graduating in 1837. On August 22, 1838, at age 20, Mr. Parvin received a certificate to practice law from the Ohio Bar Association.

Also, while in Cincinnati, Mr. Parvin saw and undertook the opportunity to become a member of the Committee for the Establishment of a Library for this city. It seems Mr. Parvin made his mark well in the state of Ohio, even at a relatively young age, before venturing on into the “land of promise,” a place known as the Iowa Territory, the land that lay west of the Mississippi River.

Records indicate a long time interest in the new Iowa Territory by the Parvin family. It was in 1833 that the permanent white settlements began to be developed within the Iowa Territory. In Mr. Parvin’s daily journals of 1838, he made mention for the first time of the Iowa Territory, a

place his father had been exceedingly interested in and was intending to visit. His father stated that he would hope to make this westward move into Iowa, “even if having to do so would be on horseback.” A younger sibling of Theodore was even given Iowa as her middle name. This younger sister was given the name Cornelia Iowa Parvin, born in Ohio in 1839, the year after her oldest brother was to begin a long riverboat journey into the Iowa Territory.

In July 1838, two plans began to take form for Mr. Parvin to go to the Iowa Territory. Mr. Parvin was also determined to travel to Iowa, as his father Josiah had, but was making his own plans to travel there alone. However, these travel plans were interrupted by another circumstance. Mr. Parvin was at that same time introduced to a man named Robert Lucas.

Mr. Lucas had recently been appointed by President Martin Van Buren to be the first Governor of the Iowa Territory and Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Mr. Lucas, a man of three past terms as the Governor of Ohio, was asked at this time to travel to Iowa for the purpose of locating placement for a capital city. Mr. Lucas made a personal request of Mr. Parvin to accompany him and to accept the newly created position as his Private Secretary. Mr. Parvin accepted.

Mr. Parvin, by accepting this newly appointed opportunity, and for the purposes Mr. Lucas outlined, eventually made his way to Iowa via the state of Ohio. The Territory of Iowa, soon being named the State of Iowa, became the major beneficiaries of a multitude of Mr. Parvin’s lifetime contributions. One author states that “Altogether, Iowa owes him much honor.”

Mr. Parvin soon made himself one of the most important men in the Territory of Iowa, and of the future state. He was self-educated; a man of many talents and interests; and served Iowa at one time or another as teacher, lawyer, judge, historian, librarian, and meteorologist.

Mr. Parvin wrote daily journal entries as he and Governor Lucas, traveled for two weeks by riverboat to Burlington, Iowa. Following are a few of his Journal Notations:

1838, July 27. “I have now decided to 'take up my bed and walk' to Iowa Territory. My reasons for doing so, in part are common to emigrants, but in part will for the present remain a mystery to all but one. Engaged calls on Lucas, but not in.”

1838, July 30. Introduced to Lucas.

1838, August 1. 2 P.M. I took aboard the Steamboat “Tempest”.....My baggage consisting of Books..... Law, Political & Miscellaneous etc., to near 300 volumes.

1838, August 4. Laid to most of the night in repairing the flat which proved leaky....the history of this concern enters largely into ours. While writing, my friend, the Gov., is, (as is generally the case with him) reading.....Buckland's Geology, a science of which he is very fond. He is a man of extensive information, possessing much knowledge of the country politically, geographically and historically. Being an early emigrant to Ohio, he engaged my companions and myself with an account of his and other's adventures, how he traversed the state when there were not roads nor bridges, save those of his own construction which were made of bark withed together, now and then leading us forward

to our future hopes and prospects, assuring us of different things to come.....”. May Iowa prosper under his guidance as Ohio has done before her.”

1838, August 5th. Sunday. Awoke and rose at ½ past 4 (am) and found that we had had a successful nights travel.....were soon ground(ed), and soon off again. In accordance with the character of the day, I read St. John.....this finishes the New Testament which I had some time since commenced. Reading no other than religious works on the Sabbath.. I began with the Acts and doctrinal parts and finished with the gospels.

1838, August 6thRead the Organic Law of Iowa Territory.

1838, August 9th. During the night we had a most violent shower of rain accompanied by violent thunder and lightning. This point bears the first impress of my visit to the State, A fine day dawned upon us to lighten our path to the Cumberland bar, where we as a matter of course grounded.

1838, August 11th. After remaining at Paduca (mouth of Tennessee) all night leaving the flat there, we embarked in high spirits. The prospect before us appears more bright than at any former period. After four hours run we came in sight of the mouth of the Ohio.....the Mississippi has come to our rescue with its turbid waters which make a contrast indeed along with the Ohio.

1838, August 14. Passed Quincy and Warsaw. Flourishing places. Opposite the latter the Des Moines river the southern boundary of Iowa T. comes in to the Mississippi. ½ past 5 o'clock we saw for the first time the “land of promise” Iowa. Just 2 weeks since we left home. This filled our minds with many speculative thoughts and feelings.

1838, August 15th. Iowa. Wednesday at 8 o'clock we arrived at Burlington with joyous feelings, this being the long sought for haven of rest. On landing the citizens came in crowds to welcome us, the Secretary of the Territory was among them.Took lodgings at the Burlington house where the citizens of all ranks and conditions came to see the Gov. and presented him with an invitation to a public dinner which he accepted.

1838, August 16th. Posted my accounts, found myself in the possession of \$135.00, a good and extensive wardrobe and a Library of near 50 Law and 250 miscellaneous.....(volumes) (Parvin then noted in his journals approximately another two weeks of traveling adventures with Robert Lucas, as well as stopping points, again by riverboat, northward on up the Mississippi River, viewing the areas near Davenport, and northward as far as Dubuque, then back south to Burlington, where the first site of the Iowa territory government was eventually chosen and marked on May 5,1839.)

In 1838, Mr. Parvin immediately began part of his life’s work using his law education. In August of that year, he received a commission to practice law in the new Iowa Territory. By 1840, he was serving as Secretary of the Territorial Council. By 1844, he was a member of the Constitutional Convention. He was appointed U.S. District Attorney. From 1847 to 1857, he served as Clerk of the District Court. He served as a county judge. In 1858, he served at the

Register of the State Land Office.

Also, in the year of his arrival into the Territory of Iowa, Parvin began making daily systematic observations of the climatological facts of Iowa weather in a journal. He recorded these observations between 1838 and 1860 in Muscatine as well as from 1860 to 1873 at Iowa City, for a total of 35 years. These records remain the only accurate records of Iowa weather at that time, as stated in the *Biographical Dictionary of Iowa*. These notations and observations were also transferred to the Smithsonian Institute.

In addition to those activities, Mr. Parvin was extremely interested and involved in the development of public education and the politics of and within Iowa. The following are in part, his accomplishments in these endeavors:

- He was one of the founders of the publications titled the *Annals of Iowa*.
- He authored several historical works including: *Climate of Iowa, a History of Early Iowa Schools*, and *the History of the Knights Templar Masonry in the United States*.
- In 1839, he collected and purchased books, with an appropriation of funds from the U.S. Congress as well as with an act by the Legislative Assembly of Iowa for the incorporation of public libraries. He bought 1,585 volumes for \$5,000, mostly of which were selected by Mr. Parvin. These volumes would eventually become the nucleus of the State Library of Iowa. He helped found the State Historical Society of Iowa.
- In 1839, he helped establish the Bloomington (Muscatine) Education society.
- In 1839, he was named first Librarian of the Territory, and requested of, and received from Governor Lucas permission to ask the U.S. Congress for a grant of land of 72 sections of land to support establishment of a new State University.
- In 1844, he helped found and organize Free Masonry of Iowa and founded the Iowa Masonic Library at Cedar Rapids (formerly at Muscatine). This is one of the largest and most complete collections of Masonic Materials, as well as a large collection of materials of Iowana and Americana. Mr. Parvin was named Grand Master and Grand Secretary of the Masonic Lodge of Iowa.
- In 1846, the voters of Iowa, owe much thanks to Mr. Parvin and “two other energetic young men” who did much campaigning for, and helped to ratify the Iowa Constitution of 1846, on August 3, 1846. Much credit can be given to these three young men for the final acceptance of the new and current boundaries. Mr. Parvin and these two others worked hard to demand that the Missouri River be chosen as the western boundary of Iowa. Votes counted were 9,492 to ratify and 9,036 against ratification. This was only 456 majority votes for Iowa’s statehood to be accepted. U.S. President Jame K. Polk signed the bill on December 28, 1846, which became the date of Iowa's admission into the Union, as its 29th state.
- In 1848, he was appointed a trustee of the State University of Iowa.
- Also in 1848, he assisted in decisions on proper instruction of natural philosophy at the university and elected Curator of Cabinet of Natural History and Librarian at the university.
- In 1859, he was named Professor of Chemistry and Geology at the University of Iowa.
- In 1861, he was named Chair of the Department of Natural History, and Professor until 1870.

Mr. Parvin married Agnes McCully on May 17, 1843, in Iowa City. Agnes McCully was born on March 1, 1819, in Pennsylvania. They had six children. Agnes preceded him in death on November 20th, 1896, in Cedar Rapids, at the age of 77, and is buried at Oakland Cemetery, Johnson Co., Iowa. Mr. Parvin died in Cedar Rapids in 1901, at the age of 84.

Children of Theodore S. Parvin and Agnes McCully are as follows:

- May Parvin, born May 7, 1844
- Harris McCully Parvin, born Feb. 27, 1847
- Newton Ray Parvin, born July 5, 1851
- Theodore Warren Parvin, born 1854
- Fred Ogilvie Parvin, born 1857
- Aggie M. Parvin, born May 22, 1861

According to one biographer, “He (Theodore S. Parvin) was in public life from the time he crossed the Mississippi until he breathed his last. His life was filled with good works and they live after him.”

The past, present, and future citizens of Iowa should well be in awe of this intelligent, determined, self-educated man, a gentleman filled with desire and grit to give much of his life’s work for the development of our “land of promise,” and to push the State of Iowa forward into its place of honor within the Union.

More information:

<https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/publications/TB/673963.pdf>