

Pieces of Iowa's Past, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides monthly, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All italicized text/block quotes in this document are taken directly from historical publications with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

150th Birthday of Montauk

Governor William Larrabee died on November 16, 1912. Two days after Larrabee's death, the editor of the Des Moines Register wrote in an editorial that "it would be the act of a grateful State to set apart Montauk as a memorial to him and as an instructive example to posterity the home of Governor Larrabee."

'Iowa's greatest commoner'

William Larrabee was the definition of a "jack of all trades" and was referred to as "Iowa's greatest commoner" in a very complimentary article from The Gazette published November 18, 1912. Larrabee's life coincides with a large portion of the history of Iowa. He came to Iowa as a young man when Iowa was also a young state. He was a pioneer in a state where everybody in that time was a pioneer.

William Larrabee was born in Ledyard, Connecticut, in January 1832. He was raised on a farm and began teaching in the neighboring schools at the age of



Governor William Larrabee holding an edition of the St. Louis Post
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19. Although William only completed the eighth grade, he was a lifelong learner and a hard worker, which would show throughout the rest of his life.

William came to Iowa in 1853 at the age of 21 to make a place in the world. He was possibly influenced by letters from his brother and sister who moved to Iowa a few years earlier. Within six years, William bought interest in a flour mill and became the sole owner of the brick mill in Clermont, Iowa. Due to his hard-working nature, William had great success and was able to expand his holdings in land, banking, and railroad-building. He would become one of the largest land holders in the state of Iowa.

William married Anna Appleman on September 12, 1861, and had seven children: Charles, Augusta, Julia, Anna, William Jr., Frederic, and Helen.



Due to his influence and connections with the railroads in Fayette County, William was elected to the Iowa Senate in 1867 to improve the condition of transportation. Sen. Larrabee served in the Senate for 18 years working to protect Iowa citizens from the power of railroad companies. He ran for governor in 1881 and was unsuccessful but ran again in 1885 and was elected as the 13th Governor of the state of Iowa.

From left to right:

William Jr., Augusta, Frederic, Anna, Julia, Helen, Mrs. Larrabee, and Charles

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The best residence of northern Iowa

William Larrabee and his wife, Anna, built a house on North Hill just outside of Clermont in 1874 overlooking the Turkey River Valley. Montauk was named by Mrs. Larrabee in honor of her father, a whaling ship captain who depended on a lighthouse at Montauk Point in Long Island, New York.



Montauk south (front) facade

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Surrounded by over 100,000 pine trees that Larrabee planted, the 14-room mansion was built at a cost of about \$20,000 with brick made of native clay and fired in a kiln in Clermont. Montauk was a working farm with barns, farm animals, an orchard, grain fields, and flower gardens. Statues of Civil War Union generals and outbuildings still stand on the 46 acres today. Items from the Larrabees' world travels also decorate the rooms within their home — Tiffany lamps, Wedgwood china, statues from Italy, music boxes from Switzerland, a large collection of paintings, and thousands of books.



Montauk pre-1907

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Although Montauk reflects the wealth and lofty status of the Larrabees, it is still modest compared to the homes of other similarly prominent leaders of Iowa and the nation.

Montauk today

Anna Larrabee, the fourth child out of seven, lived in the home until her death in 1965 at the age of 96. In 1968, her heirs deeded Montauk to the Historical Governor Larrabee Home, Inc.

Visitors will see unique and original furnishings from the period of William and Anna Larrabee. Because the house was lived in continuously for nearly 100 years, it also reflects changes in technology and style over time. For example, a 1900 wood stove stands near a 1950s dishwasher. The Larrabee family was progressive in its use of technology. The house was built with central heat, a recent innovation at that time, as well as additions of other conveniences as soon as they were available — the telephone in 1900 and electricity in 1910.



Montauk parlor room
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Montauk sitting room
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Montauk Historic Site will host a 150th birthday celebration on September 28, 2024, from noon to 4 p.m. on the grounds. Activities include special tours, wagon rides, a Civil War program, music, food, and more.



Mrs. Larrabee is the woman in the center (white dress, hatless). Her husband, Governor William Larrabee, is the short man with the moustache, standing on the right. Their longtime friend, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives David Henderson, stands with a cane, on the left. U.S. Sen. Jonathan P. Dolliver stands between the Larrabees.

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