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**June 3, 2015**

**THIS WEEK:**

## **Edwin Ruthven Clapp: Des Moines Builder on a Grand Scale**

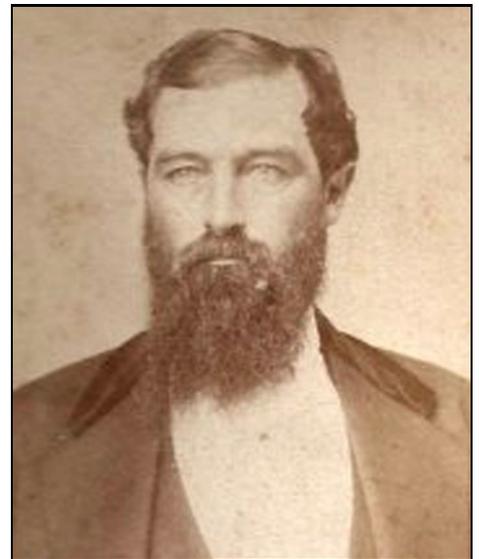
**BACKGROUND:**

*Edwin R. Clapp was born in Cazenovia, New York, in 1827. In 1837, his family moved to Mount Pleasant, Iowa.*

*In 1846, Clapp came to Fort Des Moines where, with his brother, he entered into mercantile trade. From 1847 to 1851, with the exception of a few months, he pursued farming north of the present site of Des Moines. On returning to Des Moines, Clapp engaged in freighting between Des Moines and Keokuk with teams of oxen. In 1853, he built the first ice house and stored the first ice ever housed for market in central Iowa. At the session of the General Assembly in January, 1860, Clapp was elected Sergeant-at-Arms of the House of Representatives. In 1867, he became agent for the Chicago & Rock Island Railroad Company, devoting himself to the management of the department of the Rock Island Road from Davenport to Council Bluffs.*

*Early on, Clapp exhibited a marked ability in the accumulation of wealth through prudent and judicious investments. At the time of his death, he was one of the wealthiest citizens of Des Moines.*

*From: the Annals of Iowa (1906)*



**Edwin R. Clapp  
1827—1906**

## **Edwin Ruthven Clapp: *Des Moines Builder on a Grand Scale***

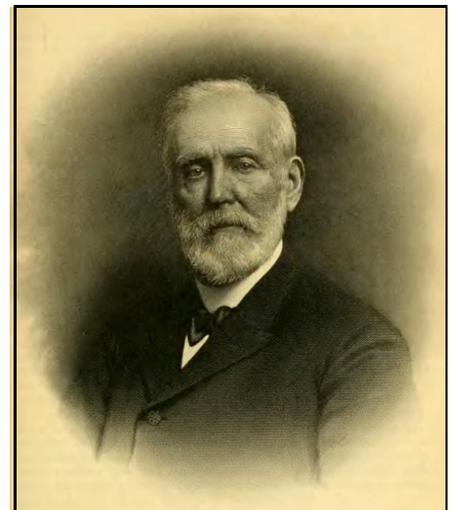
In 1845, Edwin Clapp's brother came to Fort Des Moines to engage in the grocery business. Edwin followed him a year later, in February, walking the entire distance, his trunk coming on a wagon-load of groceries from Mount Pleasant, the driver kindly giving him that much of a lift, his purse being lighter than his trunk.

He was a young man of 18 years, with pluck, ambition, and great expectations. For one of such temperament, the town presented little encouragement. It was composed of the log cabins deserted by the soldiers and about 100 people. He did whatever he could find to do. His first job was running a ferryboat for the season at \$10 a month, and it was not an easy one, for the rush of people into the new territory was great. He worked a year as clerk for his brother, who had a general store in the log building used by the soldiers for commissary storage, down at The Point, just east of 'Coon bridge.

As the community increased, so did its needs. Transportation facilities were meager. There were no railroads. The river was passable for steamboats only at flood times in the spring. Flour mills were 100 miles away. St. Louis was the nearest point for merchants to get supplies, which were sent by boats to Keokuk, and from there hauled by wagons to The Fort. At Fairfield and Oskaloosa were the nearest flour mills. That was an opportunity for Edwin. He went into the business of hauling freight from Keokuk and flour and meal from the mills. He often made trips from Des Moines to Keokuk and back. He was a good handler of stock. He drove oxen well. Alone, he would drive a yoke of oxen the 180 miles to Keokuk, and return, laden with supplies. The old flint-lock musket was his only protection; and that meant only the one shot. Trouble he may have had on these journeys, but he always managed to come through it smoothly, for he was a man of cool nerve.

In 1849, he engaged in farming, but two years later returned to town, and, being of genial, jolly, good nature, he was popular and found business abundant, as the town was growing.

In 1850, Judge Casady bought two lots at the southwest corner of Fifth and Walnut streets, for which he paid \$60. Being low in part, ice covered it in winter, and the boys made it a skating rink. The Judge built a three-room, one-story house on the lots on which he made his residence.



**Phineas M. Casady  
(Judge Casady)  
1818—1904**

In 1853, Edwin concluded there was money in real estate, and in June, bought the lots of Casady for \$550, and in July, sold them to Israel Spencer for \$500, reserving the rental and use of the buildings for five years. On this property, Edwin had a wool yard for a time.

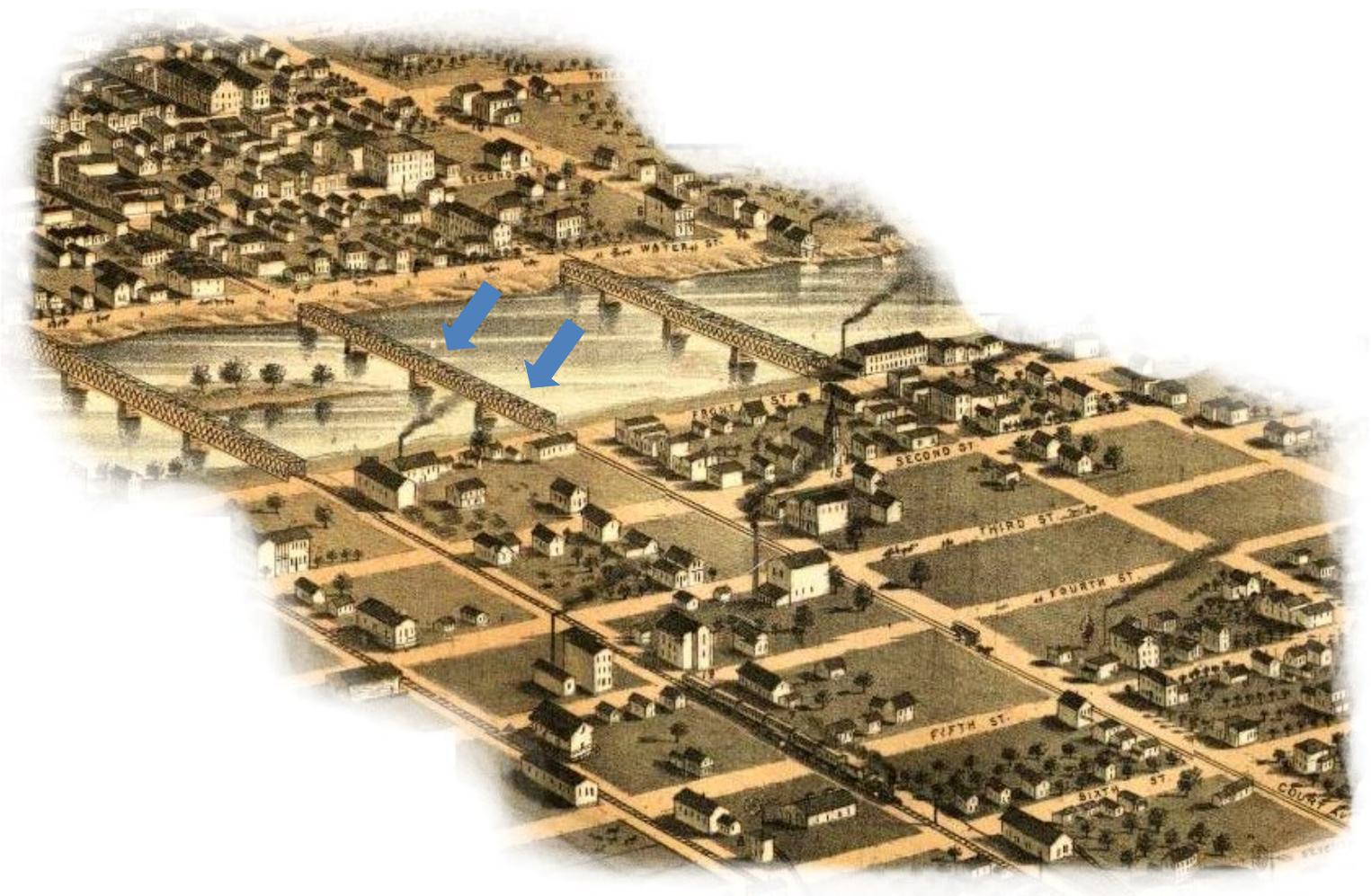
In the Spring of 1851 came what is known in history as the "big flood." The whole East Side was underwater. On the West Side, Jesse Dicks rafted logs along Second Street, of which he built his house. Bottom lands for miles in width along the Des Moines River were overflowing. The previous winter had been very severe, and the spring rainfall had made the roads impassable for teams, merchants' stocks of goods had become depleted, and family larders bare of supplies. Nevertheless, inspired with patriotic fervor, the people had a public dinner on the Fourth of July, which was attended with genuine Western enthusiasm and enjoyment. The table spread was elaborate, but the good housewives were put to their wits to supply the absolute want of flour in their cooking, for there was none to be had. On the next day, the steamboat, Caleb Cope, came into port heavy laden with merchandise, flour, etc., on which there was great rejoicing. Captain Price caught the infection, and invited the town to take an excursion up the river on his steamer. About 50 leading citizens responded, taking with them refreshments, solid and liquid (the Captain having given notice that the bar and steward's quarters would be locked). It was a jolly, hilarious crowd of men and women, among whom was Edwin. The newspapers said nothing about it, but Edwin will probably say, if you ask him, "It was rather noisy."

In 1855, the community having increased to some importance, Edwin began to mix in public affairs. He was elected Street Commissioner. The subject of bridges was an important one at that time, but how to get them, and what kind, was the problem. John H. Miller, the Civil Engineer, who made the first map of Des Moines, a copy of which hangs in the rooms of the Commercial Club, recommended to the Town Council a floating bridge. The suggestion was adopted, but the town had no money. The increase of travel, and the slow, cumbersome, inadequate ferries, made bridges a necessity. It was therefore decided to raise a fund by subscription, the subscribers thereto to be allowed to cross without toll. Edwin was given the custody of the subscription list, and nearly \$3,000 was raised, when dollars were scarce. The bridge was built at Court Avenue, that being the principal east and west street, and was the first bridge across the Des Moines.

In 1855, Edwin built a bridge over Bird's Run, on Fourth Street, a terror in those days when heavy rainfalls came. It was the first structural bridge in the town, and he was allowed \$20.99 for the job. In the present days of boodle, grabs, and "extras" in public works, the particularity of that 99 cents is significant. It shows that Edwin was honest—would not claim a penny he had not earned.

# Court Avenue Bridge Des Moines, Iowa 1868\*

*\*This is not the original 1855 "floating bridge," as described, but one of the first stationary bridges of a decade later.*



*Iowa Pathways: Iowa History Resources for Students and Teachers  
Iowa Public television*

In 1856, Edwin started the first ice business in the town. His storage plant was on the river just above the dam, and it is of record that Judge Napier, who was then general manager of county affairs, ordered the County Treasurer to pay him \$8 for ice furnished the District Court during the August Term that year. Old-timers, who are familiar with the inordinate thirst for whiskey of McFarland, the presiding Judge, will not deem Edwin's bill for congealed protoxide of hydrogen furnished exorbitant, for the Judge was seldom sober. He came into court one day in a very maudlin condition. The lawyers, litigants, jury, and witnesses in the case on trial were all present. He got himself into his chair, looked vacantly around for a moment, nodded to the Sheriff, and mumbled out: "Well! Well! Gentlemen; call this Board to-morrow morning at eight o'clock," and, gathering himself together, meandered away to his hotel.

In 1856, occurred the famous fight between the east and west sides over the location of the Statehouse. Edwin was a loyal west sider, subscribed \$500 to the war fund, and did valiant service in the scrimmage.

In 1860, he bought a farm in Walnut Township, now the well-known Flynn farm, and engaged in raising cattle and grain on an extensive scale. He was so successful that, in 1867, he was appointed Live Stock Agent for the Chicago & Rock Island Railroad and had control of that department from the Missouri River to the Mississippi. In 1865, he sold the farm and continued with the railroad company several years thereafter.

In 1860, he was elected Sergeant-at-Arms of the House of Representatives of the Eighth General Assembly.

In 1869, his penchant for town lots was aroused, and he again bought the two lots at Fifth and Walnut streets, but this time he had to plank down \$27,000. On the corner was a hide and leather store, and on the west lot a livery stable. Two years later, he built a three-story brick office building thereon, the Citizens National Bank occupying the corner. In 1882, he added another story. In 1883, it was nearly destroyed by fire, with great loss to the Masonic Lodge, which occupied the upper floor, occupants of business offices, the Citizens' National Bank, and Morris & Humphrey, merchants. The debris was soon cleared away and the building restored. In 1890, he entirely remodeled it, according to modern ideas, added another story, and put in an elevator, the first in an office building in the city, thus constituting him the first bridge builder, ice dealer, and elevator constructor in the city.

It will be seen there is a jog in Walnut Street at Fifth, by which "Clapp's Block," emblazoned on the cornice in gold letters, is made a prominent landmark on the street, to be seen by everybody. When A. D. Jones surveyed the "Original Town," it was done with a rope instead of a chain, and in making the plat, Court Avenue was made 100 feet wide, as it was expected to be the principal business street of the city. At the head of it was placed the Public Square, on which were to be the



Courthouse and other public buildings. Doctor P. B. Fagen, who owned, or held title to, a portion of the land embraced in the plat west of Fifth Street, raised objection to the survey, claiming irregularities therein. They had some difficulty over the matter, but it was finally settled by letting the survey stand as made as far west as Fifth Street, and to narrow Walnut and Mulberry streets to let in the Public Square as originally platted, and on this agreement the plat was finally made and recorded, and thus came the jog in Walnut Street.

In 1887, Edwin gave an old-fashioned dinner to the early settlers, in honor of his 50 years of residence, which was largely attended. It was a joyous reunion of those



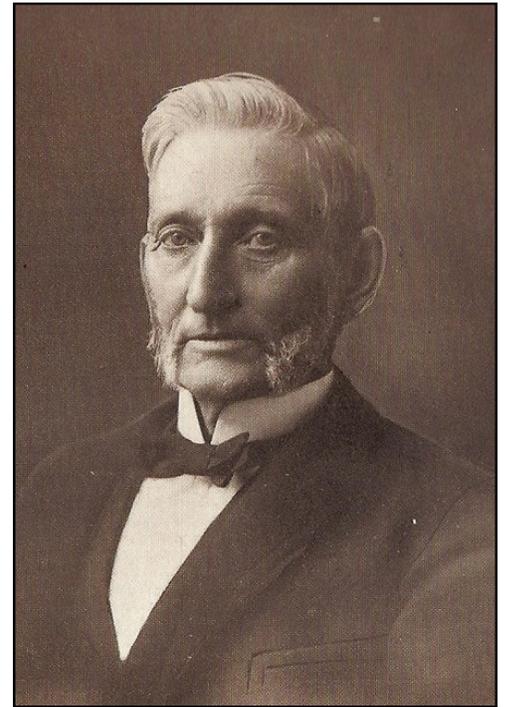
who had experienced the trials and vicissitudes of pioneer life, and an occasion for recounting them. Listening newcomers concluded they knew very little about hard times.

In 1903, when the Century Savings Bank was organized, he became a

**Edwin Clapp's house located at 1900 Grand Avenue in Des Moines**

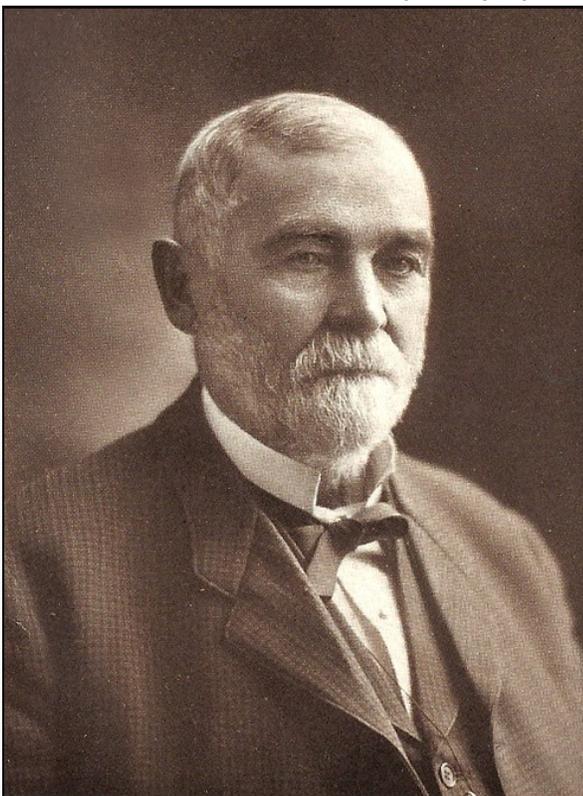
stockholder, one of the Directors, and was also elected Vice-President. The bank took the corner vacated by the Citizens National Bank.

Socially, Edwin is affable, jovial, fond of jesting and a good joke, whether the victim be himself or some other fellow. Old-timers can recall Hy. Hatch, better known as "Laughing Hatch," a government mail contractor, an inveterate jester and storyteller, who punctuated his points with a laugh that could be heard half a mile. He was known to every show company that appeared in "Billy" Moore's old hall, for when he saw anything funny in the performance, and started his cachinnation, the stage business stopped, the players and audience soon caught the infection, and everybody joined in a hearty laugh. When Edwin and Hy. got together on a street corner, every onlooker knew what was coming—there was hilarity galore. Sometimes, Levi J. Wells—he of the bus line—an inveterate jester, would join in, and they would fill the air with Hy.'s laughter.



**Levi J. Wells**  
**1831–1902**

The excellent business capacity, pluck, and executive ability manifested in all his undertakings has secured to Edwin a competency, while his loyalty and public spirit have won him a prominent place among those who helped to build up the city from the day of its foundation.



**Edwin R. Clapp in later years**

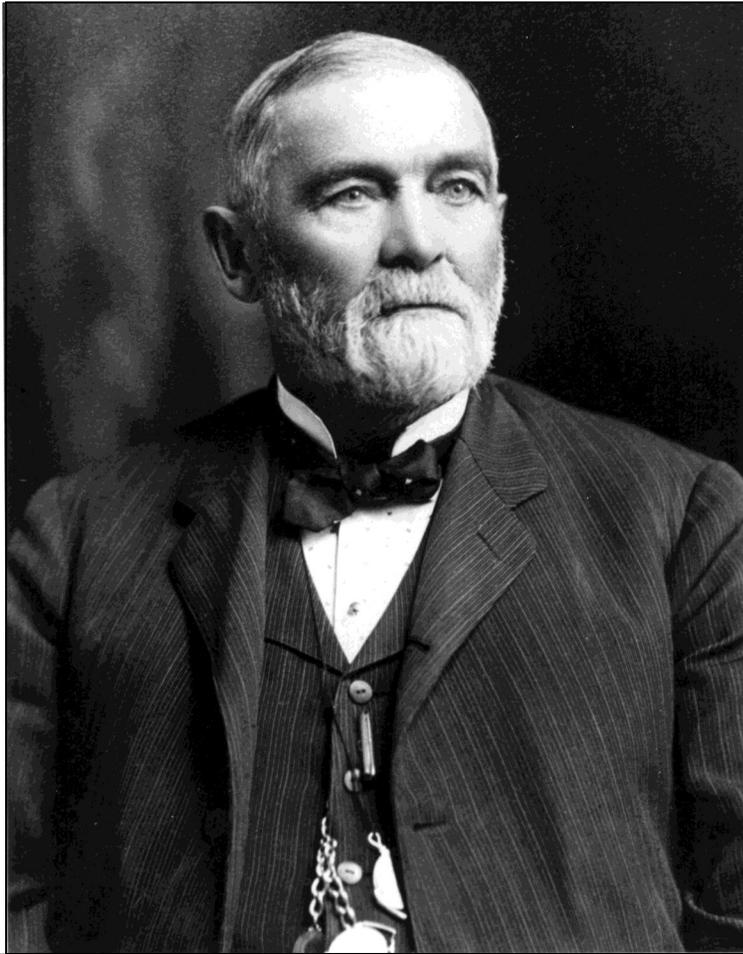
*Compiled from The IAGenWeb Project, 1996*



On the way from Oskaloosa, Mr. Clapp stopped at the only three hostelries between that point and Fort Des Moines—Sam Peet, Black Oak Grove; Adain Toole's, Tool's Point; and Thomas Mitchell, at the place where the town of Mitchellville now stands. There was no house of any description between Oskaloosa and Fort Des Moines save these three. Corporal Hill, with his corporal's guard—10 soldiers—occupied the Fort and there were evidences that an earnest culture of the arts of peace would soon be inaugurated. April 6 of the same year Fort Des Moines was selected as the county seat of Polk County, although civilization had advanced far enough to admit of a genuine county seat contest, "Saylor Bottom" being a zealous suitor for the judicial center. Of course, the present sitters won the contest. Mr. Clapp soon adjusted himself to the situation, little dreaming that where the thick hazel brush grew, the site of his handsome business block would become the most valuable piece of realty in Iowa, commanding more to the square inch, probably, than any other piece of equal surface area in the state if placed on the market. December 28 of the same year, Iowa was admitted to statehood, and Mr. Clapp has never left the land of his adoption. He endured the privations common to all the earliest settlers, who, it has been said, were "all poor alike." But as applied to them "poor" only meant lack of wealth. They were rich in moral courage and rugged physique; rich in that western spirit of independence and self-reliance; and rich in generous hospitality; resources that no one who ever attended a log-rolling, house-raising, or husking bee could have failed to notice.

Mr. Clapp, like other settlers, hauled goods from Keokuk, 160 miles distant, with ox teams, sometimes sleeping under the wagons at night, so far apart were the houses along the road. He kept pace with the state in its rapid growth. He handled much of the Iowa realty, and the handsome block which bears his name was erected in 1883, being one of the first of Des Moines' fine office buildings. It faces two of the most important streets in Des Moines, Walnut and Fifth, both of which are supplied with excellent street car service. It is the very center of the busy portion of the busy district in the busiest city of Iowa. It is not generally known that the Clapp block occupies one rod of original Fifth Street. When the city was surveyed it was intended that Court Avenue should be the business center, and in surveying the courthouse square it was discovered that in order to preserve a true square it would be necessary to narrow Fifth Street one rod, and the officials chose the latter course, rather than mar the beauty of a perfect square. This gives the Clapp block an advantage from point of view, names on the high windows of the northeast corner being legible from the state Capitol building.

Mr. Clapp has kept pace with all practical improvements and this building is as modern in its equipment as though built the present year.



**Edwin Ruthven Clapp**

**Edwin R. Clapp Gravesite  
Woodland Cemetery  
Des Moines, Iowa**

