

Annals of Iowa

Volume 1, No. 4 October, 1863

MEMOIR OF ANTOINE LE CLAIRE, ESQUIRE, OF DAVENPORT, IOWA.
BY THE EDITOR

ANTOINE LE Claire, the subject of this memoir, was of French and Indian descent, his father being a Canadian Frenchman, and his mother being the granddaughter of a Pottawattamie Chief. His father was with the early adventurers among the Indians, when they were almost the only inhabitants of the North-West Territory. As early as 1808, he established a trading post at what is now Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for the purchase of furs from the Indians. In 1809, he was associated with John Kinsey, at Fort Dearborn, now Chicago, Illinois, conducting the business of the trading post. During the war of 1812; and while many of the Indians were hostile to the United States, through British influence, he was loyal, entered the American service, and was taken prisoner in the conflict at Peoria. He was confined, with others, at Alton, but was released the same year of his captivity.

Antoine Le Claire, his son, was born on the 15th of December, 1797, at what is now called St. Joseph, in the State of Michigan. Little is known of his early youth, except that about the time of his father's captivity, during the war with Great Britain, at the instance of Governor Clarke, of Missouri, when some fifteen or sixteen years old, he was taken into the American service, and placed at school, that he might learn the English language.

In 1818, at twenty-one years of age, he served as interpreter to Captain Davenport, at Fort Armstrong, on Rock Island, Illinois. In 1820, he went to Peoria, where he married the granddaughter of A-Co-Qua (the kettle,) a Sac Chief. Her father was Antoine Le Page, a Canadian. The same year, Mr. Le Claire was sent to Arkansas to watch the movements of the Indians in that region. In 1827, he was again stationed at Fort Armstrong. And, in 1832, he was present as interpreter at the Indian Treaty, by which that part of the country West of the Mississippi river, known as the Black Hawk purchase in Iowa, was obtained from the Indians, after the Black Hawk war.

As the cholera, so prevalent throughout the United States that year, was among the troops at Fort Armstrong, the council at which the treaty was formed, was held on the West side of the Mississippi, in the marquee of Gen. Scott used for the purpose, where afterwards was the home of Mr. and Mrs. Le Claire for many years, until it and the ground around gave place to the Depot of the Mississippi and Missouri Rail Road, in Davenport, as it now is.

In this treaty, the Chiefs of the Sacs and Foxes reserved one section at the Rock River Rapids, where Davenport is now situated, as a gift to Mrs. Le Claire, upon condition of her house being placed on the spot where the treaty was made; and also a section at the head of the Rapids, on which the town Le Clair is built, was reserved for Mr. Le Claire. The Pottawattamies, also, in the Treaty of Prairie Du Chien, presented Mr. Le Claire two sections in Illinois, on which reserve, the flourishing manufacturing village of Moline is now situated. The treaty with the Sacs and Foxes was ratified by Congress in the following Winter; and, in the Spring of 1833, Mr. Le Claire erected a small building in what was then the village of "Morgan," where these Indians had lived for years. The principal Chief of this village was Pow-e-chiek, and the head warrior was Ma-quo-pom. In the Autumn of 1838, the Sac and Fox tribes left this place for the Cedar River region.

In 1838, Mr. Le Claire received the appointment of Postmaster, and also of Justice of the Peace, being deemed a very suitable person to adjust any difficulties between the white settlers and the Indians still resorting there. He had a very extensive jurisdiction, the largest of any other Justice

of the Peace in all Iowa, embracing the whole "Black Hawk Purchase," or extending from Du Buque on the North to Burlington on the South, and from the Mississippi river, on the East, to the Iowa river, on the West. The population of Du Buque and Burlington, at this time, was small, only two hundred and fifty in the former place, and in the latter, two hundred. So that the double duties of Mr. Le Claire, as Postmaster and Justice, were not very onerous nor lucrative, and left him leisure for other pursuits. As early as 1836, he established a ferry across the Mississippi, and, it is said, used to carry the mail in his pocket as Postmaster. An incident is related of him, at that early day, which shows the condition of the wool business. It is said, that the owner of some sheep, which he first sheared, gave their fleeces for ferrying them over, which Mr. Le Claire kept a while; but not being able to make any use of the wool, burnt it, diffusing no very pleasant odor around his house. A contrast is presented now, in cars freighted heavily with the best sheep and wool going eastward by the ton, bought at sixty cents a pound.

Mr. Le Claire was a remarkable linguist, considering his little early opportunities for study, speaking a dozen different Indian tongues, besides French and English. And, besides the treaties already named, he was interpreter at the following, namely, that of the Great and Little Osages at St. Louis, and of the Kansas at the same city, in 1825; of the Chippewas at Prairie Du Chien, in 1825; of the Winnebagoes, at the same place, in August, of that year; of the Sacs and Foxes, at Washington, in 1836; and also of these Tribes in 1837; and of the same, at the Sac and Fox Agency, in Iowa, during 1842.

In 1835, he sold to Col. George Davenport a portion of the town which bears the name of Davenport; and from time to time, he made addition to the original plat, till he became one of the greatest proprietors in Iowa, perhaps the largest, including the site of Le Claire, which also grew to a large town. In 1836, he built the hotel which bears his name, to which addition after addition has since been made, including the whole side of the block. And to every branch of business he has extended aid by helping worthy and enterprising men, even involving his own princely means at times to assist others in their enterprises or difficulties.

To the Churches of the City, he was particularly liberal, especially to those of his own creed; for he lived and died a Roman Catholic. To three Churches of the Catholic order, he gave grounds and means for their erection. Indeed, the third, St. Margaret's, was built wholly at his expense, furnished and supplied with an organ, while the officiating Priest and expenses of public service, were, for a time, supported by him. This structure is conspicuous, near the Le Claire Mansion on the Bluffs, which house was built by him, after he gave up his old "council" cottage and grounds to the occupancy of the Railroad, nor was Mr. Le Claire wanting in liberality to other denominations. The writer of this imperfect sketch, had the pleasure, in 1840, during the month of June, of calling on Mr. Le Claire, with Mr. Strong Burnell, then a member of the Congregational Church, worshipping in the unfinished loft of a small store, on the corner of Second and Brady streets; and of soliciting a lot for a Congregational Church. With smiling countenance, he cheerfully replied: "Well, I have given the Catholics one; and, I suppose, I must serve them all alike." He did subsequently give them a lot, which they used in procuring their present site for a church.

Mr. Le Claire died on the 6th of September, 1861, suddenly, at last, with a third attack of a paralytic disease. His funeral was attended on the 26th of September, by a multitudinous procession of citizens, and old settlers of the county, on foot, walking mournfully to the church and the grave, attended by Rev. Mr. Palmorgues and two other Priests. The funeral sermon was subsequently preached by Rev. John Donlan.

An expensive monument has been obtained from abroad to mark his grave, but a better monument is found in the remembrance of those who knew him.

It is proper to add, that notwithstanding the revulsion of the times, Mr. Geo. L. Davenport, the executor of Mr. Le Claire's estate, has secured a handsome inheritance to the widow and other relatives.

It is to be regretted, that a complete life of this remarkable man has not been written from his own lips, but death too soon snatched him away from among men. And most of his adventures and explorations in our Western wilds have left no trace, like the track of the Indian race, by which the living can follow his earthly course.