Chapter 2--Territorial Iowa, from A New History of Iowa

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Iowa Territory, 1833-1846

On June 1, 1833 Iowa officially opened to American settlement. People rushed into the eastern portion of the territory, lured by the promise of fertile new land. Iowa was part of Michigan Territory, and then Wisconsin Territory, until July 4, 1838. It then became known as Iowa Territory, a region on the west bank of the Mississippi River that stretched from Missouri to Canada. The federal government ruled territories until they became states, appointing a few officials, such as a governor and judges. It also surveyed and sold land. Iowa quickly filled up with migrants, whose arrival helped spur the famous, though bloodless, “Honey War” with Missouri. Though it was nominally a free state, slavery was tolerated, but not widespread. A tiny population of African-Americans found themselves subject to the white majority, which strictly regulated their lives. A series of treaties forced the Sac and Fox out of Iowa and opened up most of the territory to settlement. After rejecting an 1844 constitution that reduced its size, Iowa’s voters approved a new constitution two years later. In December 1846 Iowa joined the United States.

Thousands had waited impatiently for Iowa to open up for settlement on June 1. Those who tried to claim land early were chased out by the American military, whose officers included the future Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Newcomers could settle on a strip of land about fifty miles wide adjacent to the Mississippi River—the Sauk, Fox, and other tribes had not yet ceded the rest of the territory. Three ferries took people and animals across the Mississippi River to towns such as Dubuque and Burlington. Long lines of wagons waited their turn. Others crossed in boats, their horses swimming nearby. Some left before dawn, eager to explore and claim land.¹

More than 96,000 people came to the Territory of Iowa before statehood. One family of ten, the Duffields, migrated in March 1837. They moved from Ohio to Illinois and finally Iowa, claiming land four miles east of the Des Moines River in the southeast corner of the territory. They built a cabin, with the assistance of neighbors and began farming. A newly married couple, Kitturah Penton Belknap and George Belknap, left Ohio for Iowa in October 1839. They bought a claim from a family who returned to Missouri, acquiring plows, chickens and a small log cabin. They both worked incessantly to save money to buy their land. Celinda Dutton moved to Iowa with her family in 1840 from New York. Her parents and five of her sisters traveled in wagons that carried household goods, as well as fruit trees for their new home. The family was heading for Scott County, to live near a cousin. They brought a dog named Bogus with them. All three families were squatters—people who lived on government land that had not yet come up for sale.²

In May 1834, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Kearny and three companies of United States Dragoons were ordered to establish an outpost near the mouth of the Des Moines River. The army wanted a stronger military presence in the area and a base for operations west of the Mississippi River and north of Missouri. In late September the dragoons joined civilian contractors that had been sent from St. Louis to build the outpost. The soldiers spent weeks helping to complete work on Fort Des Moines before winter came. Life was difficult for them. Construction had been shoddy and roofs leaked. Buildings were cold and snow drifted in. Fleas and sickness plagued the soldiers—many drank too much alcohol and some deserted the army. The next year Kearny and his men explored northern Iowa and southern Minnesota, visiting territory mostly unknown to Americans. They travelled 1,100 miles, passing two Sac and Fox villages and encountering herds of buffalo. Kearny’s officers included Capitan Nathan Boone, son of the famous frontiersmen Daniel Boone, and Lieutenant Albert M. Lea. The dragoons mapped parts of the “Iowa District” that they saw and also searched for a good location for a new fort farther west. Eight years later, Fort Des Moines number two was built where the Raccoon River flowed into the Des Moines River. The first Fort Des Moines was abandoned in June 1837. Most of its troops were transferred to Fort Leavenworth in Kansas.3

In 1836 Albert M. Lea published a small book called Notes on the Wisconsin Territory. The booklet brought attention to Iowa and helped give the place its name—he referred to the region as the “Iowa District of the Wisconsin Territory.” Lea reviewed the geography and recent history of the region, as well as its climate and resources. He described the landscape, “as one grand rolling prairie” that was full of streams and springs. The soil was rich, the land beautiful and the climate pleasant, he bragged. “It surpasses any portion of the United States with which I am acquainted.” He claimed that villages had sprung up “far in the interior” and that 30,000 people would live in Iowa by the end of 1836. Neither of these statements was accurate and Lea’s promotional pamphlet repeatedly exaggerated the development of Iowa. He had resigned from the military because he was not allowed to publish his book while an officer. Lea did not have entirely wholesome motivations, as he wanted to make money off selling property to immigrants. While his financial speculations failed, his pamphlet popularized the Iowa region.4

Those who moved across the Mississippi River into the Iowa district migrated to a region without “any regular machinery of government,” wrote historian William Petersen. They were distant from authority and lived on land that was not even surveyed. Oddly, Iowa—as well as other parts of the northern Louisiana Purchase—had not been part of any official territory until it was added to Michigan Territory in 1834. This lack of legal clarity revealed the need for some sort of government, especially after one Iowa settler, Patrick O’Connor, murdered George O’Keaf in late spring 1834. O’Connor defied a local ad hoc Dubuque jury, arguing that he could not be punished because there were “no laws in this country.” Appeals to President Andrew

Jackson failed, as the federal executive had no jurisdiction in the trial. O’Keaf was hung on June 20. The orphan Iowa district was added to Michigan Territory eight days later and divided into the two counties of Dubuque and DeMoines. Plans were made to establish courthouses and enforce the laws of the Territory of Michigan.  

Iowa was part of the Territories of Michigan and then Wisconsin until the creation of the Territory of Iowa on July 4, 1838. The United States admitted new states only after they had passed through two stages of territorial government. In the first stage officials appointed by the federal government held power. A governor, secretary, and three judges could write laws, usually adopted from other states. The also appointed other officials, such as sheriffs. Once a district had 5,000 free male inhabitants voters could elect the lower legislative branch, while Congress choose members of the upper house. Legislation required a majority of both houses, but the appointed governor could veto any laws. Territories could also send a non-voting delegate to Congress. When the Territory of Iowa was created it contained 22,859 people and stretched from Missouri to Canada. Independent territorial status gave Iowa increased political power and its own governor.  

The first Governor of the Territory of Iowa was Robert Lucas. He had served as Governor of Ohio before being sent to Iowa. President Martin Van Buren appointed him for a term of three years. Lucas arrived in Burlington on August 15, 1838, which he adopted as a temporary residence until a territorial capital was chosen by the legislature. The new governor immediately called for the election of a Territorial legislature and toured eastern Iowa. Van Buren appointed judges, as well as an attorney and marshal. In November, Lucas recommended legislation regarding education, militia organization, the creation of a criminal code, and economy in government spending. More than one-half of the first territorial legislators were born in the South. In their first term, they imposed harsh restrictions on African-Americans, barring them from voting, testifying against whites in a trial, or attending white schools. Black Americans had to provide a certificate proving they were free and post a $500 bond to enter the territory. In 1840 intermarriage between blacks and whites was made illegal. When the legislative session ended one diarist, Theodore Parvin, noted that most of the lawmakers were “all drunk with few exceptions.” Such behavior may have accounted for the governor’s comment that, “the population of the territory was the same as is generally found in frontier settlements—hostile, yet rude.”  

Iowa City was the first capital of Iowa. A three man commission was given the task of choosing a site for the new capitol, which was to begin on May 1, 1839. Only one individual showed up; the others did not. In the afternoon, a rider was sent to collect one of two missing

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men so that a majority of the committee could begin the selection process. The next day the two men found a suitable location, which also had plenty of stone to build a capitol. Settlers had moved into the area in 1838, erecting cabins and a sawmill and establishing a ferry across the Iowa river. The capitol was laid out in the spring and the first town lots sold in August 1839. More than one hundred were sold. One former Pennsylvanian bragged to John B. Newhall that his home had been growing in the woods five days before. People flooded into the new town, from tavern-keepers to doctors and lawyers—of which there were 16 just two years after it was founded. A hotel was built, too. The same firm that built the Illinois capitol was hired to construct the Iowa capitol. The legislature and government moved to Iowa City in December 1842. It had 900 residents four years later, with eight mail routes tying it to the rest of the territory. Even as it gained population, the first migrants heading to the Oregon Territory passed through.

Families had moved into Iowa hoping to acquire land, but none could be sold until it had been surveyed. The first surveys in Iowa—outside of the Half Breed tract—began in the fall of 1836. The federal government hired surveying parties on contract to lay out the square grid of townships and sections that has segmented most of the United States. Surveyors did not get paid much—$2.75 per mile—and often rushed to reduce costs. Inspectors auditing their work found many errors. Corners were not marked and township and section lines were wrong. Cold weather, flooding, and mosquitoes made work difficult, but shoddy surveying often occurred. Surveyor Willard Barrow found armed settlers with contesting claims also provided trouble. They interfered with measurements and destroyed markers to mislead rivals. The average surveying party consisted of six to eleven men, including chainmen, an ax man, moundmen, and a deputy surveyor, who led the group. The surveyor used a compass to set straight lines, while assistants marked trees or built mounds of earth to mark township and section lines. “Our work was hard, our days long,” wrote Ira Cook. “We were at work in the morning as soon as we could see, worked as long as we could see at night.” They lived on bread, salt pork, beans and coffee. Despite such hardships, the enormous task of surveying the state was finished in 1858.

Imperfect surveying led to the famed “Honey War” with Missouri in 1839. The dispute arose out of a careless surveyor who left an uncertain border between the two states. A surveyor appointed by Missouri decided that the boundary between the states was too far south. He set a new one farther north. This new line gave Missouri 2,616 additional square miles of land and deprived Iowa of the southern portions of its southernmost counties. The Missouri legislature declared that this new line was the new border in February 1839. Farmers in Van Buren County in southeast Iowa did not appreciate their sudden annexation to a slave state. In August a Missouri sheriff from Clark County, Uriah Gregory, attempted to collect taxes in the disputed area. Iowans refused to pay. The sheriff returned in November with several hundred men—he was arrested for trespassing by the sheriff of Van Buren County. The Missouri Governor then called out the militia. Some impatient Missourians cut down some “bee trees,” giving the

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conflict its name. Iowans headed south, many armed with pitchforks and clubs, to confront the invaders. Iowan Aristarchus Cone wrote that some took shotguns, while others went armed with whiskey and broomsticks. After one very cold night many deserted. The crisis quickly passed and both sides backed down. The issue was sent to Congress to negotiate. Congress then gave the problem to the Supreme Court, which decided by 1851 to accept the original border.¹⁰

The federal government first sold land in Iowa on October 1, 1838, but people had been scrambling to claim it since the territory had opened up. Settlers and speculators had been touring eastern Iowa for years, searching for a home or for an investment opportunity. George Duffield recalled that his family had hosted many who were exploring the territory. His father had withheld information about the countryside from those with “smooth manners and better clothing,” while helping migrants who were plainly dressed. Squatters in Iowa, such as the Duffields, who did not yet own their land, viewed non-settlers as a threat to their property claims. Possible speculators were viewed with suspicion—they were seen as heartless and greedy men who only sought a quick return. Settlers feared that they could buy the land that families lived on, depriving them of a home and any improvements, such as a cabin or fencing. Suel Foster, who bought a one-sixth interest in the town site that became Muscatine, explained the squatter ideal clearly. “The crowns of Europe handed down laws to our forefathers, but we, the ‘squatters’ of Iowa, handed laws up to our rulers and they acknowledged our ‘sovereign power’ and accommodated their laws to suit our necessity.” Farmers needed to acquire land to survive and they would not let anyone steal it from them. In one instance, on June 5, 1849, one farmer, Joseph Ross, killed a man who outbid him for his claim. He was later acquitted for the crime.¹¹

To protect their land claims, squatters and settlers created extralegal organizations, known as claims clubs. Such organizations appeared in at least one-quarter of Iowa’s counties, including Keokuk, Madison, and Boone Counties. The Johnson County Claim Association was the most well known and had more than 270 members. These included Governor Robert Lucas, who was a member in 1840. Their goal was to “forestall the land speculator and claim jumper,” wrote historian Allan G. Bogue. Though outside the normal legal system, the Iowa Territorial legislature recognized and upheld the claims of squatters in 1839. The territory’s supreme court supported such associations too. Members of claims clubs pledged to assist other members to protect their claims. Clubs registered and protected land claims, mediated disputes, and helped ensure that their members were not outbid at land auctions. Hundreds of men showed up at auctions, surrounding the land office and keeping rival bidders at bay. Some clubs allowed families to make multiple claims—up to 320 acres of land each. This helped current members,


but only reduced the amount of land available to those who arrived later. Claims clubs also threatened or intimidated those who questioned the property ownership of their members or violated rules that they enforced.12

Mob violence was usually a last resort, but it was a threat that was carried out on occasion. One incident known as “The Majors’ War”—named after an infamous family—occurred near Oskaloosa in the mid- and late-1840s. This large household made ten land claims of 320 acres each that were viewed as legitimate. However, Jacob Majors also maintained that he owned some timber property claimed by three other men. Nearby clubs, which had members with property in the area, told him to abandon the timber land. He ignored the demands. Outraged neighbors destroyed some buildings on his property. In retaliation, Majors asked that leaders of the violence be arrested. A force of 500 marched to the town of Oskaloosa to intimidate Majors and any sheriff who might wish to arrest their allies. Jacob Majors surrendered his deed to the disputed property, but continued to push for the arrest of his former neighbors. He was later kidnapped, stripped naked, and coated in tar and feathers. Humiliated and defeated, he left Iowa.13

The first land sales in Iowa occurred in Burlington on October 1 1838. Thousands of men filled the town. Those with more wealth stayed in hotels, while most settlers stayed in more humble housing, often camping out. George Duffield’s father, James, went to the town in November to purchase his claim. He took $200 that he had borrowed at 50% interest from a money lender that offered loans to squatters. James Duffield feared that he would be outbid at the land auction, but he had joined a claims club in Van Buren County. At a public land auction, each quarter section, or one-quarter of a square mile, of a township would be called out. The announcer, or crier, would then wait thirty seconds for a bid before moving on to the next quarter section. Duffield’s neighbors intimidated outside speculators and ensured that he could buy his land. When he returned home, the family enjoyed “the joy of possession supported by title. Our claim and cabin were indeed our own,” Duffield wrote. Sometime in the 1840s, Kitturah Belknap and her husband George also purchased their land. She had made butter and sold eggs and meat to earn money; George had cut timber in winter to sell. His boots froze “as hard as bones,” she wrote. The Duttons settled in the northwest corner of Scott County, rented a cabin, and set about growing flax to sell to earn money.14


The receiver of the Burlington Land Office, Ver Planck Van Antwerp, recalled that when the fall auction of land concluded, “I had received over a third of a million dollars, mostly in silver.” He took seven tons of coin to the Bank of the State of Missouri in St. Louis to deposit. A teller took three weeks to count the money.\textsuperscript{15}

While the government was selling land in eastern Iowa in the late 1830s, it had not yet forced the remaining Sauk and Fox tribal members from the territory. After the Black Hawk Purchase, surviving tribal members had moved into central Iowa and away from the initial wave of settlers. They pursued a traditional cycle of hunting and agriculture, surviving in an area outside their normal hunting grounds. Their subsistence was hampered by a lack of large mammals to hunt—bison had retreated to the Great Plains and competition with settlers reduced the deer population. Scarce game forced them to hunt farther away, bringing them into conflict with the Sioux. Americans and Europeans continued to press into Indian lands as well. Tribal divisions and recriminations over their defeat in the Black Hawk War hurt the Sac and Fox. In 1836 and 1837 they were forced to sell more than a million acres of land adjacent to the Black Hawk Purchase. The ceaseless march of settlers west continually pressured the remaining tribal members. Iowa Territory had a white population of more than 46,000 in 1840. Thousands more came every year. Squatters took their land, while unscrupulous traders left them deep in debt. Disease and liquor also took their toll on Indian numbers and resistance. All of this undermined the Sac and Fox and encouraged additional land cessions to the Americans.\textsuperscript{16}

In 1842 the U.S. government completed negotiations to finally remove the Sac and Fox from the Territory of Iowa. Initially, the government wanted the two tribes to move into southwest Minnesota, but the tribe protested, with Keokuk arguing that it was a poor and distressed area. Wapello, chief of the Fox, told the Americans that they had already been forced to sell Rock Island, Dubuque and other places. “This is all the country we have left, and we are so few now, we cannot conquer other countries. You now see me and all my nation. Have pity on us. We are but few and are fast melting away.” The Sac and Fox had few options though. They were deep in debt to white traders and their annual annuity could not feed them. With hunting becoming increasingly difficult and whites threatening their land, they sold their remaining territory in Iowa. Almost ten million acres were lost in the October 11, 1842 treaty. It mandated that all tribal members had to leave Iowa within three years. They were forced to migrate even farther west to Kansas.\textsuperscript{17}

The removal of the original native inhabitants of Iowa led to a frantic dash for “The New Purchase.” Roads heading toward the cession were full of men, women, and children eager to take possession of it. Hundreds of restless migrants invaded the tenuous border between Indian country and Iowa Territory. Many drank heavily; some were violent. Historian Jacob Van Der Zee called the most desperate land seekers “landless frontier scum.” Incursions into Sac and Fox

\textsuperscript{15}V. P. Van Antwerp, “Source Material of Iowa History: Reminiscences of Early Iowa,” 349.
lands occurred so often that the U.S. army had to be called in to restore order and keep squatters out. Parts of central opened up to American settlement at midnight on April 30, 1843. Squatters with torches moved west in a mad dash for the best spots, which led to scenes of wild confusion and overlapping and irregular claims. Within months, 5,000 people supposedly lived in Wapello County. The furious competition for new lands occurred again in October when an adjacent section was opened to settlement. Nearly 150,000 people flooded into Iowa in the 1840s, pushing settlement toward Fort Des Moines Number Two.¹⁸

Debate over admission to the United States began almost as soon as Iowa Territory was established. Governor Lucas had suggested that a state constitution be written in 1839, but the legislature ignored him. When it was put before voters in 1840, the idea was defeated by a three-to-one margin. A new presidential administration replaced Governor Lucas in 1841 with Governor John Chambers, who also endorsed statehood. Iowa voters rejected another attempt in August 1842. The United States paid the costs of territorial administration, reducing the tax burden of Iowans, which helps to explain the lack of enthusiasm for statehood. But, as Iowa’s population increased, newcomers supported statehood. Joining the United States meant that Iowa could elect its own governor and have more influence in Washington with its own senators and representatives. The state could also get a share of federal funds to improve sections of the Mississippi River for steamboat traffic. Florida—a future slave state—needed to join the union at the same time as a free state. This would maintain equal representation in the Senate between slave and free states. If Iowa delayed its application, it might have to wait a few more years to become a state. In December 1843 Governor Chambers proposed a vote on statehood. The legislature agreed to authorize an election. Voters endorsed the idea of a constitutional convention in April 1844 and elected delegates to the convention in August.¹⁹

In October a constitution was written for the future state of Iowa. Most delegates to the convention were farmers and nearly two-thirds had been born in Northern states. Former Governor Robert Lucas was one of the delegates. Many sections echoed the United States Constitution, such as the proclamation of separation of powers and the state Bill of Rights. The constitution established a bicameral legislative branch with two houses, as well as a governor and lieutenant governor in the executive branch. A judicial branch, consisting of a supreme court and a district court made up the third branch of government. The constitution also directed the legislature to create a school system. Suffrage was reserved for white men over the age of 21. This constitution did not allow the incorporation of any bank or “corporation with banking privileges” unless voters approved such a charter. A serious economic depression, starting with a financial panic in 1837, that lasted until the early 1840s had left many Americans, and Iowans, suspicious of banks. One delegate called them “swindling machines,” while another said that banks were “the common enemy of mankind.” The convention adjourned on November 1, 1844 and the constitution was forwarded to Congress for approval.²⁰

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The Iowa Constitution strictly regulated the lives of the tiny population of African-Americans in the territory—only 188 lived in Iowa Territory in 1840—and demonstrated the prevalent racism of white Americans of the time. Such laws were common in Northern states. In the late 1830s, black men could only vote in four states; segregated schools existed almost everywhere in northern states. So, Iowa was very much like nearby states with racist legislation, such as Illinois, where interracial marriage was banned. One committee report argued that Iowa could not be opened for black settlement, as a flood of black immigrants would endanger white Americans. This report contended that the two races could not exist together peacefully. Idleness, crime, and violence would follow black settlement. The exclusion of all African-Americans almost became part of the constitution. But excluding all black Americans from the state might endanger admission to the union, so this law was not included. The document did not allow blacks to vote or serve in the militia.21

Some of Iowa’s first pioneers were black though. Stephen Kearney, an army officer, brought a slave woman to Iowa in 1834. Iowa’s small African-American population mostly lived in towns along the Mississippi River and worked as laborers. Many lived in Dubuque, where 72 blacks lived in 1840. They made up about five percent of the town’s population. Slavery was not widespread, but it was tolerated—16 of 188 African-Americans in the territory in 1840 were listed as slaves. Some owners mislabeled their human property as “free colored” in the census. The second territorial governor, John Chambers, brought a few slaves with him. One of them, Cassius, was a servant for Chambers during the legislative session. The secretary of the territory also owned several slaves. The two federal officials owned a total of 7 or 8 slaves. While often tolerated, slave owning was not widely embraced by Iowans. One Keokuk slaveholder moved across the Des Moines River to Missouri to escape criticism from neighbors.22

In 1834, Ralph, the slave of his Missouri owner Jordan Montgomery, came to work in the Dubuque mines. Ralph had agreed to work in Dubuque to earn $550, plus interest, to buy his freedom. He labored for five years, but was unable to pay the debt. Living costs were simply too high to save much money. In 1839 two Virginians offered to return the slave to his owner for $100. Montgomery did not want to lose his investment, so he agreed. The two Virginians swore that Ralph was a fugitive slave before a justice of the peace. A sheriff arrested Ralph and sent him to a riverboat in handcuffs. But a Dubuque merchant named Alexander Butterworth had watched the kidnapping. He got a writ of habeus corpus from Judge T.S. Wilson, which forced the case to be brought before a judge to determine the legal status of the arrest. Ralph was rescued just before the boat sailed and taken before Judge Wilson, who asked that the case be transferred to the new state supreme court. Wilson happened to be a member.23

Ralph’s case was the second to come before the Iowa Supreme Court. Fortunately, he had a strong argument for his freedom. American law supported the rights of a slave who lived


22 Robert Dykstra, Bright Radical Star, 5-8.

23 Robert Dykstra, “Dr. Emerson’s Sam: Black Iowans Before the Civil War,” Iowa Heritage Illustrated 85: 2 & 3 (Summer & Fall, 2004), 55.
in free territory, while still owned as a slave. The Missouri Supreme Court had supported at least a dozen freedom suits from slaves who lived in Illinois. The Missouri Compromise, which specified that territory in the Louisiana Purchase north and west of Missouri would be free, helped Ralph’s case. The Iowa court ruled that Ralph was a free man—not a slave, nor a fugitive slave. On July 4, 1839 he was freed. The next spring, Judge Wilson found Ralph working in the garden behind his house. The freed slave was working for the judge for one a day a year to express his gratitude.  

While Ralph managed to achieve his freedom, another black man was killed by a mob in Iowa just one year later. Nathaniel Morgan and his wife Charlotte had lived in Dubuque since 1833, both working at a boardinghouse after they arrived. In 1840 Charlotte was a laundress, while Nat worked as a cook and waiter at a hotel. In early September, a group of men seized Nat and accused him of stealing a trunk full of clothes. A mob formed, reinforced by intoxicated patrons of nearby bars. They tied Nat to a post and began to whip him. He claimed innocence, but then confessed. After 100 lashes, the mob took him to where the trunk supposedly was located. They whipped him nearly forty more times when they did not find it. They took him to his house and whipped him before his wife. The mob then dragged him into the woods where he was killed. A trial ended in acquittal for the accused leaders of the mob.  

The contradictions between the salvation of Ralph and the death of Nathaniel are clear. Both occurred in Dubuque, but historian Robert R. Dykstra views the rescue of Ralph to be an anomaly, given the overall racial climate of the town. Residents of the town demonstrated a more overt prejudice, by specifying only whites could vote and by not hiding their ownership of slaves from census takers. While Iowa was not Dubuque, the territory was not a tolerant place for black Americans. While Iowa would become a far more racially progressive state in the 1860s, it took a civil war to help change racial attitudes.  

Iowa’s admission to the United States hit a roadblock when the House of Representative modified Iowa’s borders. The state border was moved east and reduced the size of the state by about one third. Northern congressmen wanted Iowa to be a smaller state, so that more states could be carved out of the Louisiana Purchase for admission as non-slave states. Congress approved, and President Tyler signed, this modified statehood bill, which allowed both Iowa and Florida to become states. Florida joined the United States in March 1845, but Iowa did not become a state for almost two more years. Iowans were unhappy with these new boundaries. Voters rejected the state constitution because of the altered borders in elections in April and August 1845. A new constitutional convention was called and a second constitution was written in May 1846. It closely resembled the one from 1844. Major changes included extending the term of governor from two years to four years and totally outlawing banks in the state—leading to a shortage of money in the state and a lot of dubious currency from other places for years. In August 1846 voters ratified the new constitution.  

Even as Iowa struggled to join the Union, Mormon migrants sought to leave the United States. Almost 20,000 crossed southern Iowa in the 1840s while heading to Utah to escape persecution in the United States. Their prophet, Joseph Smith, had been murdered and they had been driven out of Illinois, where they had built a city called Nauvoo. In February 1846,

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24 Robert Dykstra, “Dr. Emerson’s Sam: Black Iowans Before the Civil War,” 55-57.  
26 Robert R. Dykstra, “Dr. Emerson’s Sam,” 56-59, 63.  
Mormons began landing at Montrose, in the very southeast corner of Iowa. Thousands then headed west across the territory in winter. Refugees trekked through a mostly uninhabited country that had no roads, suffering from bitterly cold weather, sickness, and diseases ranging from malaria to scurvy. When it was above freeezing, pathways turned to deep mud that slowed travel to a few miles a day. Hunger and malnutrition plagued them and hundreds died on their journey. Whenever possible men worked for local farmers, clearing land or shucking corn to earn money for food. Five hundred Mormon men volunteered to fight in the Mexican War, forming the famous “Mormon Battalion.” The wages from these soldiers helped to buy desperately needed foodstuffs. Once they arrived at the Missouri River it was too late to head to Utah. They survived another winter along the Missouri River before departing for their new homeland.28

On December 28, 1846, Iowa joined the United States, its disorderly march to statehood finally over. Iowa elected a state governor and other representatives on October 26 without waiting for the U.S. government to recognize its legal existence. These elections may have been void, but this did not seem to trouble anyone. Iowa’s first governor was Ansel Briggs, who had been a stagecoach driver and sheriff. The state also sent two congressmen to Washington, D.C. and elected the first state legislature. Governor Briggs was sworn in 25 days before Iowa became a state. However, Iowa did not send any U.S. Senators to Washington. A political deadlock between the Whig and Democrat parties kept anyone from being elected. So, Iowa’s messy political history continued until the Second General Assembly broke the stalemate and sent George W. Jones and Augustus C. Dodge to the national capitol.29

The existence of the Territory of Iowa had been brief, but much had occurred. The federal government had surveyed and sold land to immigrants, as well as expediting the removal of the Sauk and Fox from Iowa. Almost 100,000 people lived in Iowa when it became a state. The tiny population of African-Americans had few rights, and suffered from occasional brutal violence. While slavery was dying in the state in the 1840s, the condition of black Iowans improved little. In the fifteen years between statehood and the Civil War Iowa’s population gained almost one-half million people. The story of frontier Iowa is the next chapter.

29 Benjamin F. Shambaugh, The Constitutions of Iowa, 210-212; Cyrenus Cole, Iowa Though the Years, 187-188.