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The Palimpsest

Volume 74 | Number 2

Article 4

4-1-1993

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Recommended Citation

Gutjahr, Paul. "Hundreds of Sould Lie in the Balance': An Eastern Congregational Minister Ponders Moving West to Iowa." *The Palimpsest* 74 (1993), 54-61.

Available at: https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol74/iss2/4

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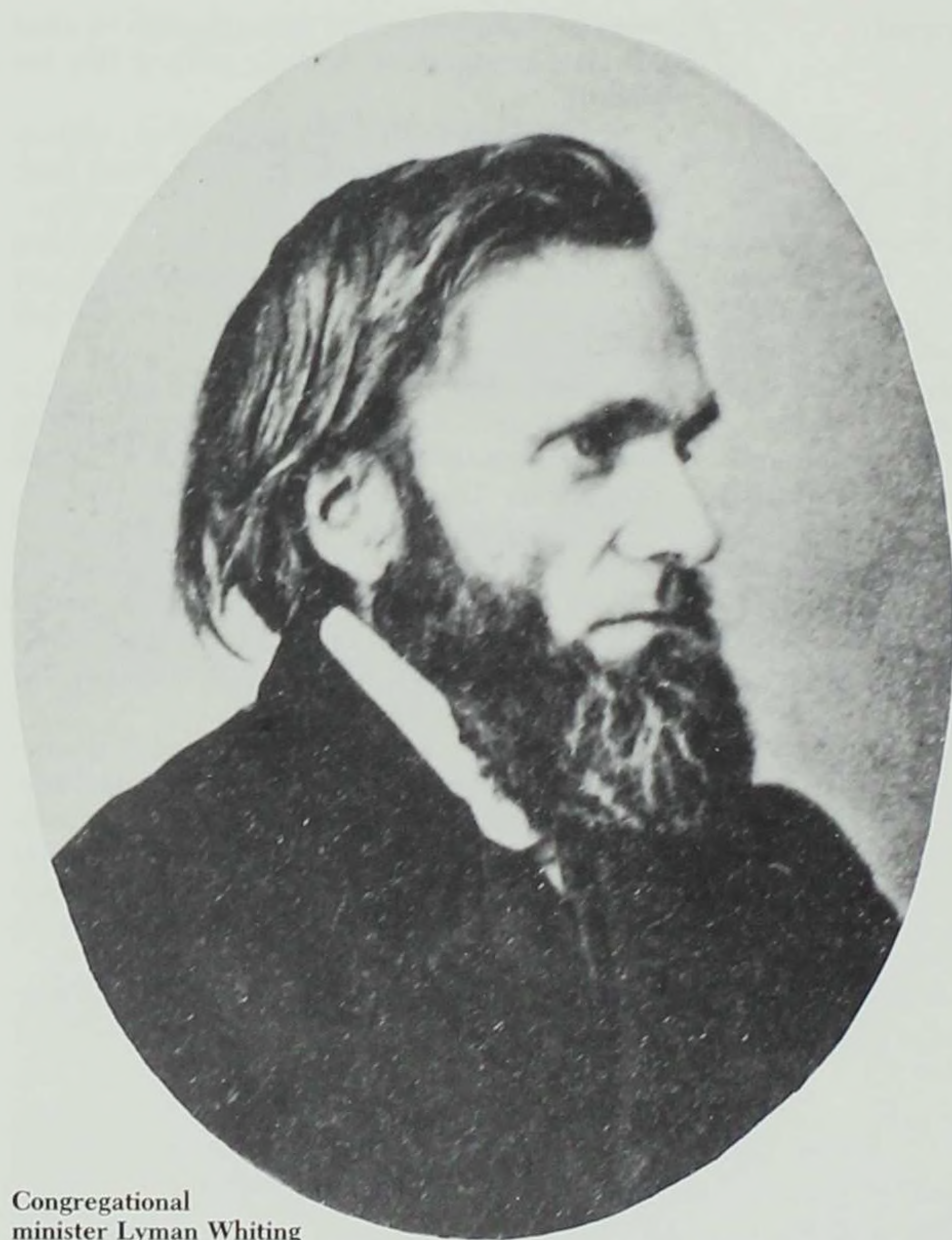

Congregational minister Lyman Whiting

'Hundreds of souls lie in the balance'

An Eastern Congregational Minister Ponders Moving West to Iowa

by Paul Gutjahr

LYMAN WHITING faced one of the biggest decisions of his life in the spring of 1864. For months, he had been writing his minister friends asking for their help in locating a church with an opening for a pastor. Finally the Reverend Milton Badger of New York, a longtime friend of Whiting, sent a letter telling of an opening in Dubuque, Iowa. Badger wrote that "Dubuque is a very important fort — a large western city, and has one Congregational Church only in it — I must also say that I have heard of a heartful of worries and debt."

A church full of worries and debt may not have held much promise, but Whiting's need for a job was great and his options were few. Within two months of receiving the letter, Whiting had left Uxbridge, Massachusetts, on his way to Iowa to present himself as a pastoral candidate at Dubuque's First Church.

Being a candidate for a Congregational pastorate was an arduous undertaking. It involved visiting the church for an extended amount of time; preaching numerous closely scrutinized sermons; giving fastidiously evaluated lectures; and finally, interviewing with a number of constituencies of the congregation. It was a grueling ritual even if one really liked the church and community. Within a few days of his arrival in Dubuque, however, Lyman Whiting had serious doubts about whether the church or the town was much to his liking.

Whiting's wife, Sophia, and their six children remained behind in Massachusetts. In the months that followed, as the evaluation process continued, Whiting would write dozens of letters to his family. In them he expressed how much he missed his wife and children, and he asked for their aid in deciding whether to take the position if it was offered. These letters provide a unique window onto a difficult choice facing a Congregational pastor and his wife — whether to leave their comfortable home in the East to minister in the West.

WHITING WAS CERTAINLY not the first eastern Congregational minister to consider moving to Iowa to enter domestic mission work. In 1829 a group of seven Yale seminarians — later known as the Yale Band — had committed themselves to spreading the gospel in the West. The fiery Asa Turner, part of the Yale Band, was one of the first Congregational ministers to cross into Iowa. Turner visited Denmark, Iowa, to organize a church in 1838, and once there, he decided to stay. He immediately began pleading with his counterparts in the East to send him trained ministers to bring Congregationalism to Iowa. "Every little town in the territory has a-plenty of lawyers, and scarcely one in ten has a minister of our order. During the five years in which New England and New York have sent but one minister, who has never been here before, Rome has sent us five [Catholic priests], and I think more." Turner refused to mince words when it came to the working conditions. "Don't come here expecting a paradise," he wrote in 1843. "Our climate will permit men to live long enough, if they do their duty. If they do not, no matter how soon they die."

In 1843 eleven students from Andover Theological Seminary accepted the challenge to be Congregational missionaries in Iowa's earliest years. Later known as the Iowa Band, the eleven were full of energy and vision, declaring that "if each one of us can only plant one good and permanent church, and all together build a college, what a work that will be!" (Indeed, in the next twenty years, nearly 150 Congregational churches and a college were founded.)

This fervor in establishing denominational footholds in western settlements was fueled by a huge number of Congregational pamphlets and newspapers published in the 1840s, '50s, and '60s to boost missionary work within the United States. This promotional literature continually declared that a battle raged in America's West. On the one side stood the Protestants, who considered themselves self-appointed guardians of the true Christian faith. On the other side, the publications claimed, stood the forces of "infidelism, Romanism, Mormonism, and SATANISM in every form."

At the head of these latter minions, accord-

ing to the publications, stood the Pope. As one Congregational writer put it in an 1842 issue of *Home Missionary*, Catholicism "had long directed a hungry eye to the immense tracts of land which comprise the Mississippi Valley, driven forward by an inward heaving and an ambition to compensate herself for her losses in the Old World by her conquests in the New. There is no doubt that the Valley of the Mississippi has been mapped and surveyed by emissaries of the Vatican, and cardinals are exulting in the hope of enriching the Papal See by accessions from the United States."

One important "battleground" in this spiritual war between Protestants and Catholics was indeed in the Mississippi valley — the river town of Dubuque in the newly established Iowa Territory. By 1839 the Dubuque area had come under the watchful eye of the charismatic and industrious Roman Catholic bishop Mathias Loras. As early as 1843, Loras had successfully petitioned the Roman Catholic church for "52,827 francs, or upwards of $10,000," *Home Missionary* reported, "*the largest sum granted to any diocese* except that of Vincennes — larger even than that of Cincinnati, and double any other grant except those." At the same time, Protestants were not spending even half that sum for mission labor in that area.

Given the propagandistic tone of the missionary literature, one might expect the troops for this Catholic/Protestant battle to have comprised erudite Jesuits, revival-bent Baptists, and dashing Methodist circuit riders — all equally zealous to establish their respective churches in the West. But a different profile emerges in Lyman Whiting, an indecisive Congregational minister wary of moving west in 1864. His is a story of a reluctant "soldier of Christ," spurred on by dire financial necessity and the vision, courage, and spirituality of his wife, Sophia.

LYMAN WHITING had several personal considerations for staying in the Northeast. First of all, he was forty-seven. This was far older than most ministers who, fresh out of seminary training and challenged by domestic mission work, chose to move west. Furthermore, his wife was in poor health, and half of their six children were under the age of ten. He had spent the first twenty-one years of his ministry in Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island — the Northeast, home and hearth of American Congregationalism. Lyman Whiting was too old, too much of an easterner, and had too many family responsibilities to brave the challenges of what he considered an "uncivilized" river town.

Whiting might have better identified Dubuque as an already strong Catholic community, beset by political differences and economic hardships. Roughly a third of Dubuque's population was Catholic, largely German and Irish immigrants. As early as 1854, deep divisions had begun to appear in the community as "Know Nothing" nativists began to vocalize their anti-foreign and anti-Catholic views and recruit followers. The "Know Nothings" struck hard against Dubuque's foreign-born population (about four-fifths) and substantial Catholic minority.

If the tensions inherent in demographic differences were not enough, Dubuque was still suffering from the nation-wide depression of 1857. A Dubuque bank president later described 1857 as the year "the bottom fell out, and every one was left financially without even a fig-leaf. . . . Hundreds were completely ruined, and the fragments of catastrophe were visible . . . for many years after. Many persons left the city, business houses closed, banking and other corporations suspended, improvements ceased, stores and dwellings were given over to vacancy and desolation, and gloom reigned supreme."

When Whiting arrived in 1864 as a candidate for the pastorate, he quickly detected signs of the depression. He wrote his wife: "The town is terribly hurt by 1857. & the war is not helping it as it is us. It looks dejected."

Everywhere Whiting turned, he saw signs of what he interpreted as physical and moral immaturity — dirt, disorganization, and unfinished building projects. The first night he stayed in Dubuque he conveyed his initial impressions to his family: "Dubuque! a vast, rocky grotto, — rude — wild-dirty, rough inconceivably! We reach this house by 168

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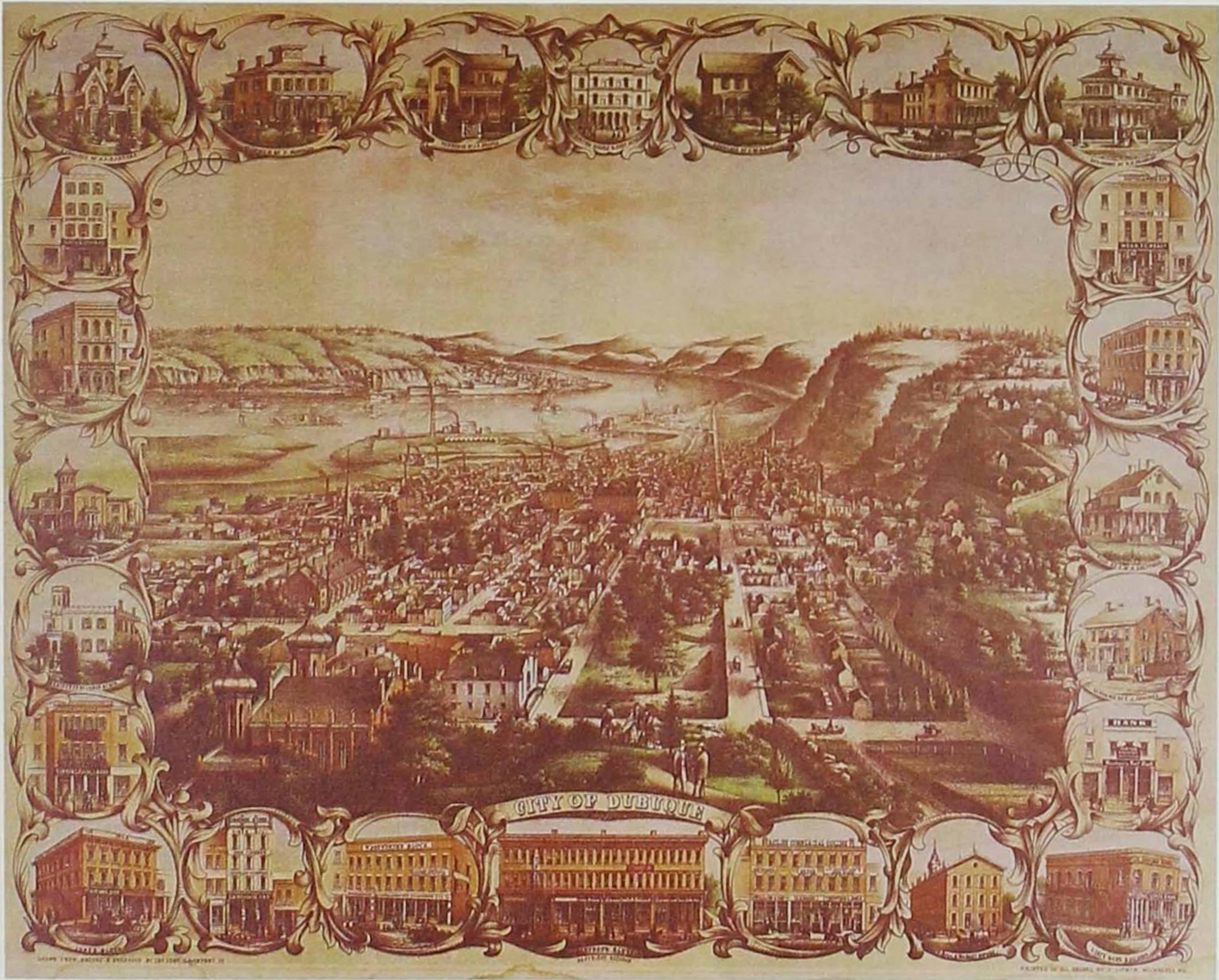


This lithograph of Dubuque (circa 1866) shows a clean and orderly city with elegant homes and prosperous businesses — far different from Lyman Whiting's perceptions of Dubuque when he arrived in 1864.

stairs fr. main St. You can find nothing finished — a slovenly . . . wilderness, of mud coarse." Two weeks later, his tone still had not changed: "All here is down — credit — customs — posture, life — The work is one of restoration, & a good family will be a mity help — in piety, manners & all. But t. privations! Dust, mud — never once clean! no roads — side-walks, — libraries or finish on any thing! Ruins & ruggedness all about you! Coming & going the order of life." Summing up his first glimpses of Dubuque, he wrote: "Dub. is I'm persuaded the most ragged, [disordered] place I ever saw inhabited."

At times, it seemed to Whiting that the East and West were two separate countries. Manners and customs differed, and the formality of the East was lacking in the West. Whiting wrote that the word "comfort" had no place in the western dictionary. He found life in the West unpredictable and harsh: "Tis all one sharp emergency — brilliant success & sweeping Disaster — the two poles, — really composing the entire zone of life."

Furthermore, Whiting contended, the spiritual state and attitude of the population was a far cry from that of the Puritan stock of Whiting's New England. In a letter to his daughter Nellie, Whiting noted that the people of Dubuque "live almost wholly on the past in their morality & piety; — on the future as to the gains needful for life. — What they in the East were as Christians & disciples is a mode of thought. — What they expect to be in property

is as much the theme — but they need the Gospel; tho it seems to have little visible effect." Later he wrote his wife: "The Spiritual life here is much [decayed?] — few faithful praying souls. 'Tis not a little hopeless."

CERTAINLY IT WAS with "eastern eyes" that Whiting reluctantly surveyed his new surroundings. But add to these subjective observations a very real obstacle for a pastoral candidate: the huge debt of Dubuque's First Congregational Church. In 1857, Bishop Mathias Loras had commissioned European-trained architect John Mullany to begin work on a third Catholic church, the massive St. Raphael's Cathedral. Refusing to be outdone, the Congregational pastor, Reverend John Holbrook, began work that year to erect a huge, new church on the corner of Tenth and Locust streets.

Unfortunately, the small Congregationalist flock could not sustain the costs of such a project, and by 1864 the church found itself $11,000 in debt. So desperate was their situation that Reverend Holbrook had recommended to Whiting (even before Whiting had arrived to interview) that the church building be sold to the Catholics.

Whiting's impressions of the new church were equally desperate: "Yellow-honeycombed rock & huge unused building. The church is a shameful abortion of brick & black walnut — not one thing about it is finished. The debt is 'about $11,000!' No organ & no seats built in the galleries. It is a pitiful sight aspiring great things — doing little."

Given the large debt; church attendance (less than a tenth of the Catholic churches); the cultural and spiritual disparities between the Northeast and Dubuque; and Whiting's age and large family, it is little wonder that he agonized over leaving the Northeast. This concern appears as a common refrain in several letters: "I think in a N.E. ch — I could do more for Him."

Nevertheless, when Whiting was offered the position, he accepted it and brought his family to Dubuque. Just as his letters and diaries reveal his hesitation, they also reveal the reasons he finally took the position. First, he was

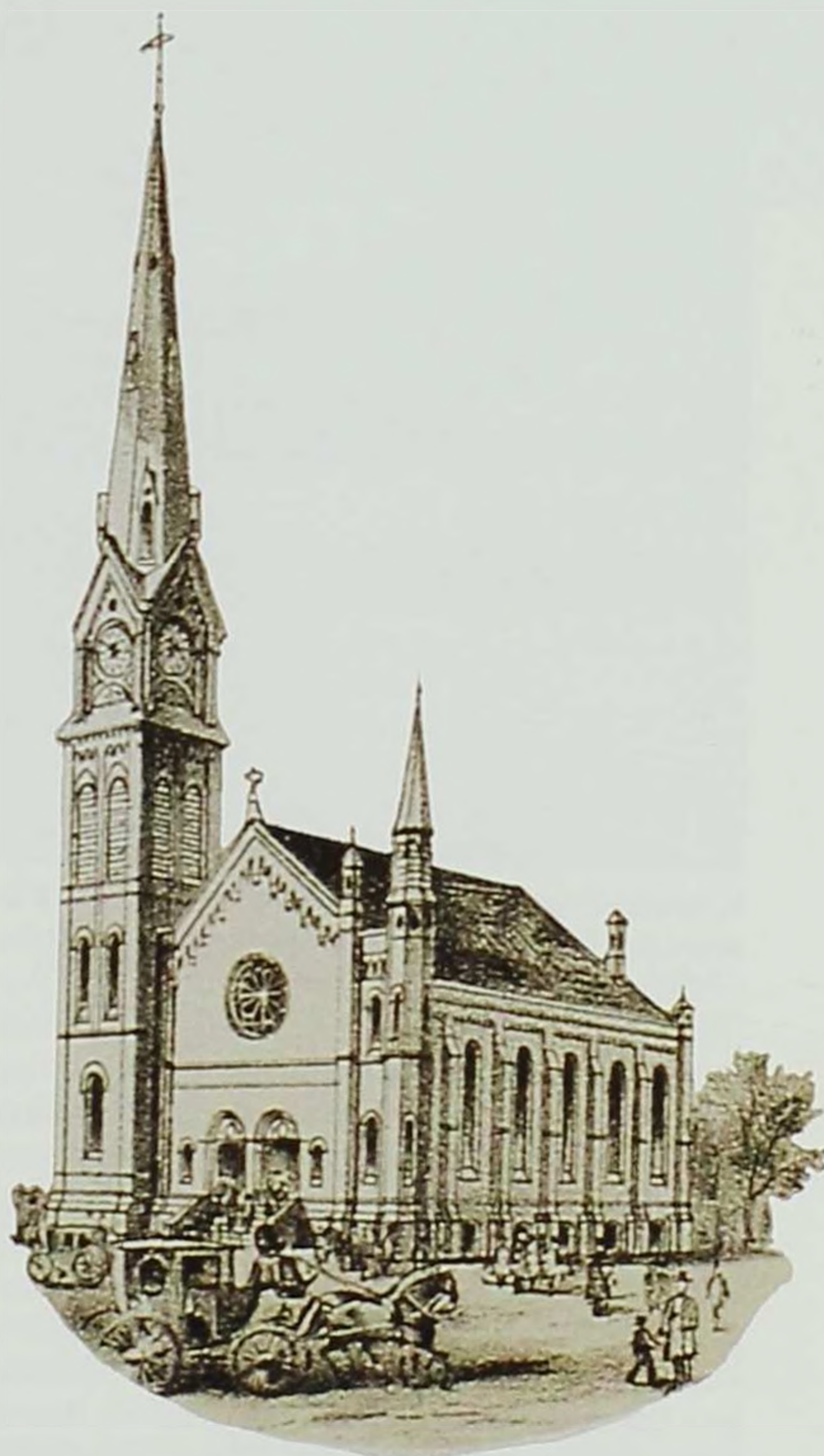
Bishop Mathias Loras and architect John Mullany had great plans for the third Catholic church in Dubuque, St. Raphael's Cathedral. Its tower, finished later, differed from the one in this 1858 lithograph.

in desperate need of a pastorate. He had been recently removed from his church in Rhode Island through a power struggle with the church's reigning elder (also its chief financial donor). He now had no visible means of supporting his large family. Dismissal from an eastern church was a heavy blow that could have ended his ministerial career. Although a pastor's life was demanding and difficult, the East was oversupplied with Congregational ministers. There were many more pastors than congregations and churches. A pastor who had lost his position and could not count on a favorable recommendation from his former church found himself in a tremendously difficult position.

Secondly, Whiting apparently heeded the advice he sought from his wife, Sophia. We know little about Sophia except that she was often in poor health, gave birth to six children, and died in 1882 after being married to Lyman for thirty-nine years. More importantly, the evidence we do have — through their correspondence — suggests a woman of tremendous strength and determination.

OUR INTRODUCTION to Sophia comes in the form of a covenant she wrote in 1838, when she was sixteen. It is clear in this covenant that Sophia Chamberlain was pondering just what it would mean to marry and leave her home. She wrote: "My mind is deeply impressed with the conviction that God by the way he is now guiding me, is preparing events in such a manner that if I continue the acquaintance with Mr. Whiting, I should some day leave this land of my fathers — this dear home of my youth — these dear friends — and exchange them for the dark hordes of the earth where the glad news of salvation never sounded — and in view of these impressions — I this day enter into a solemn covenant with the Lord to be his forever." She made it unmistakably clear in this covenant that even though she was thinking of leaving her home and marrying Lyman Whiting, her first and foremost commitment was to her Lord.

This same sense of conviction marks every letter Sophia wrote to her husband. While



As the new Catholic cathedral rose up, so did a new First Congregational Church. Pastoral candidate Lyman Whiting was not impressed; a large debt now threatened the church. As with St. Raphael's, the tower was completed later and in a different form than in this 1858 lithograph.

"The church is a shameful abortion of brick & black walnut," Whiting remarked about the new building, "not one thing about it is finished." This 1860s stereograph by Dubuque photographer Samuel Root shows the First Congregational Church apparently before the steeple was finished.

Lyman's letters from Dubuque are filled with indecision, self-pity, and a yearning for eastern comforts, Sophia's replies are in a bold and striking hand. "Don't come back to N.E. to live in ease and comfort a few years more," she advised, " — then to go up to say, 'I might have gone to that little ch. who would have loved me. I might have spoken through the press and in a thousand ways in those wild states. But the prayers of my children might have saved many — their voices might have led multitudes to sing thy praise o[f] Christ.'" She added, "No doubt, hundreds of souls lie in the balance."

Instead of being a passive spouse awaiting her husband's decision, Sophia placed herself center stage in this drama. She was the driving force behind their vision of ministry meeting the spiritual needs of the West. In her correspondence, she relentlessly pushed her husband to look beyond personal weaknesses and preferences to consider much larger issues — like the glory of God.

Whiting confided that if he were a younger man, he might be able to undertake the demands of moving to and ministering in the West. But now as the father of six, he feared he was too old to "carry on his back" so much responsibility and such a large family. Sophia replied that "none of us expect to ride 'on your back.' I expect to walk strongly, hopefully,

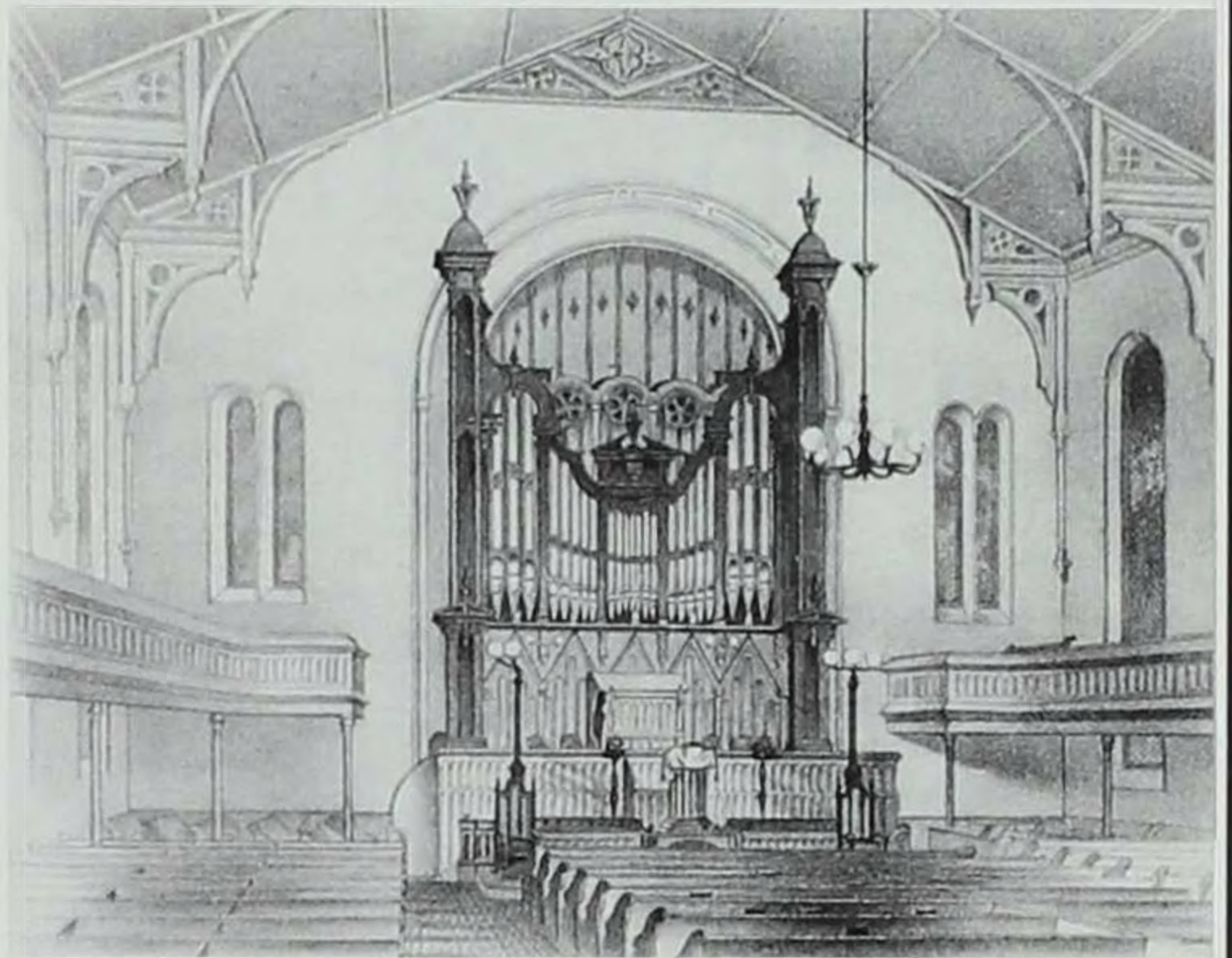
prayerfully, thankfully by your side." In the same letter, she remarked that their daughter Nellie "not only expects to walk, but is dreadfully afraid she should have to carry you on her back before we get there."

We know little about Sophia after she and her children joined Whiting in Dubuque (perhaps by September of 1864). We do not know whether she — like so many of her Congregational sisters in the Northeast — joined the city's Temperance Society, stood for the abolition of slavery, taught Sunday School, or prepared packages for foreign missionaries. But we do know that at a pivotal moment she pushed her husband to accept a pastorate in the West.

In many ways, Lyman Whiting's ministry in Dubuque proved to be a success. The church grew under his care, and the $11,000 debt was paid off in just two years. Three years after moving to Dubuque, he reflected on his ministry in a New Year's diary entry: "A pleasing mystery veils this Dubuque emigration." While he admitted that he did not fully understand how he had ended up so far from his eastern home, he knew that he had gained a renewed sense of mission and purpose in life. Amazed at what God had wrought in his life, he reasoned that God had brought him and his family west so that they might put their trust more fully in Him. He wrote of his stay in Dubuque: "All pure — time — to God. Do All — dare all — be all — yield all to him."

AFTER FIVE YEARS in Dubuque, Lyman Whiting moved to a new church in Janesville, Wisconsin, which he served for another five years. Then, in 1874, he returned to the East and was pastor in four churches over the next three decades. He remarried in 1884, two years after Sophia died. He died in 1906 in East Charlemont, Massachusetts.

DRAWN BY ALEXANDER SIMPLOT; PHOTO FROM FIRST CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, DUBUQUE



When Whiting arrived, he was distressed that the new church had "no organ & no seats built in the galleries" and called it a "pitiful sight aspiring great things." By 1869, Whiting's last year in Dubuque, a new organ was in place (shown here), the congregation had grown, and the building debt was paid off.

Whiting's correspondence from the early 1860s gives readers today a picture of Dubuque, Iowa, through the eyes of an eastern minister wary of the West — though perhaps his observations tell us more about him and his preconceptions than about the town itself.

The letters also provide a vivid historical example of women's roles in making decisions. Sophia Whiting's letters to her husband undermine stereotypes about wives passively accepting their husbands' decisions. We now know of yet one more woman who stood as the prime mover in a family's move from the relative comforts of the East to meet the spiritual needs of the West. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

The Lyman Whiting Papers, which include Lyman and Sophia's correspondence, are in University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City. Other sources include *Minutes of the General Association of Iowa* (Davenport, June 1854); *The Home Missionary and Pastor's Journal*, vols. 14, 15 (1842); and *Our Country: Its Capabilities, its Perils, and its Hope* (New York: Executive Committee of American Home Missionary Society, 1842). Secondary sources on Congregational history include Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, *History of American Congregationalism* (Boston, 1942); Truman O. Douglass, *The Pilgrims of Iowa* (Chicago, 1911); Rev. Albert E. Dunning, *Congregationalists in America* (New York, 1894); and William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: 1783–1850, Vol. III, The Congregationalists* (Chicago, 1939). Dubuque sources consulted were three Dubuque county histories and William Wilkie, *Dubuque on the Mississippi* (Dubuque, 1987).