



Race, Courage, and Discipline in Iowa's Heroic Age

by Robert R. Dykstra

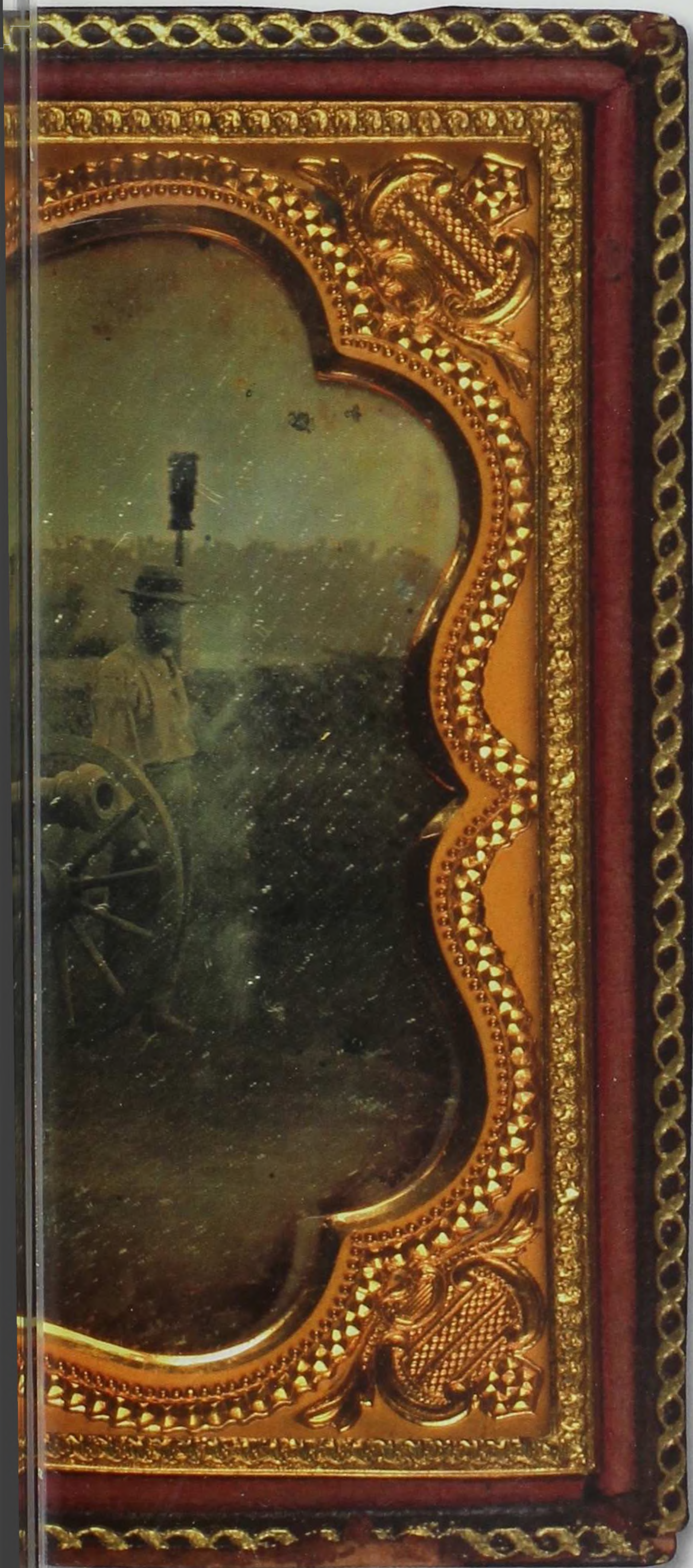
A hundred and fifty years ago the people of Iowa knew they lived in "interesting times," that the eyes of America were upon them.

The Mississippi & Missouri Railroad had laid track into the Hawkeye State in 1855, only to pause indefinitely in Iowa City. As at any frontier railhead, the need to off-load westbound travelers and cargo, then crowd everything into wagon transportation, inflated prices and triggered a wild whirlwind of speculation in horses, groceries, warehousing, and building sites. The *New York Tribune's* Horace Greeley, antebellum America's most respected journalist, wearily climbed down off the train, looked Iowa City over, and reported to the nation that "almost every one here who isn't getting drunk is getting rich."

But an issue of far more consequence than the price of stallions and corner-lots swirled through the streets of Iowa's capital. To the west, American slavery had begun to embrace its doom. All Iowans, whether they liked it or not, found themselves caught up in the great political slide into civil war.

In May of 1856 a savage little prequel to the nation's impending crisis flared up in Kansas Territory, where

Armed Free State volunteers and emigrant parties detoured in Iowa City and crossed southern Iowa into Kansas Territory, bypassing proslavery vigilantes in Missouri. Here, within an elegant daguerreotype frame, is an extremely rare image of a Free State battery, 1856.





Race, Courage, and Discipline in Iowa's Heroic Age

by Robert R. Dykstra

A hundred and fifty years ago the people of Iowa knew they lived in "interesting times," that the eyes of America were upon them.

The Mississippi & Missouri Railroad had laid track into the Hawkeye State in 1855, only to pause indefinitely in Iowa City. As at any frontier railroad, the need to off-load westbound travelers and cargo, then crowd everything into wagon transportation, inflated prices and triggered a wild whirlwind of speculation in horses, groceries, warehousing, and building sites. The *New York Tribune's* Horace Greeley, antebellum America's most respected journalist, wearily climbed down off the train, looked Iowa City over, and reported to the nation that "almost every one here who isn't getting drunk is getting rich."

But an issue of far more consequence than the price of stallions and corner-lots swirled through the streets of Iowa's capital. To the west, American slavery had begun to embrace its doom. All Iowans, whether they liked it or not, found themselves caught up in the great political slide into civil war.

In May of 1856 a savage little prequel to the nation's impending crisis flared up in Kansas Territory, where

Armed Free State volunteers and emigrant parties detained in Iowa City and crossed southern Iowa into Kansas Territory, bypassing proslavery vigilantes in Missouri. Here, within an elegant daguerrotype frame, is an extremely rare image of a Free State battery, 1856.

proslavery and "free state" paramilitaries jockeyed for supremacy. Since Missouri, a slave state, was supporting the proslavery militias in Kansas, near-neighbor Iowa became a conduit for hundreds of free state fighters and their equipment—including almost 2,000 guns illegally smuggled out of the state arsenal in Iowa City. Volunteers arrived there by train, rendezvoused, organized themselves, then set off toward Kansas afoot or on horseback.

To supervise the recruits and funds raised back in New England a few of the biggest names in the anti-slavery cause detrained in Iowa City: Rev. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, young Frank B. Sanborn. Other free state celebrities arrived from the other direction, from the war zone itself, among them the flamboyant free state militia leader Jim Lane, whose "Lane Trail" across thinly populated southern Iowa became the supply route and line of communications between Kansas and Iowa City, with support groups along the way.

Not until autumn did the United States Army finally intervene to stop the fighting, and Kansas simmered down.

Months before the presidential vote of 1856 it was clear that "Bleeding Kansas" had driven Iowans into the arms of the nation's newly formed Republican Party, which opposed slavery's spread into the West. "Iowa is more deeply interested than any other State in saving Kansas from the grip of the Slave power," reported William Penn Clarke, a prominent Iowa City activist. Dr. Howe, writing back to Boston from Jim Lane's forward supply base at Quincy in Adams County, agreed. "The people of Iowa are all in a blaze of indignation," he wrote. He predicted a great victory here for the new party. And so it proved.

The month before the November presidential election the most die-hard antislavery guerrilla of them all

slipped out of Kansas with a price on his head. "Captain" John Brown rode through Iowa City, then located his new military headquarters among the abolitionist Quakers near West Branch, knowing they would keep his presence a secret. There he began training his most trusted associates (four of them Iowans) for an attempt to foment a great slave uprising at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

It was, of course, a breathtakingly fatal miscalculation. But John Brown's martyrdom in 1859 did accomplish his transcendent purpose. The raid on Harpers Ferry powered America to the very threshold of the Civil War—a war that ended with the death of chattel slavery.

It's no surprise, then, that even before the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861, reflective Iowans felt the press of world-historical events, felt themselves living in "heroic" times. This prompted them to think seriously about preserving their collective memories of the pioneer past, before it was too late, by officially archiving them in a state historical society. Iowa City's Samuel Kirkwood, destined to lead the Hawkeye State through the first years of the Civil War as governor,

was the idea's presiding genius in the legislature. He stiffed a demand that the proposed historical society be located in Burlington, or that it move west when the seat of government shifted from Iowa City to Des Moines in 1857. He did so by tying it institutionally to the fledgling University of Iowa, then successfully fought off efforts to move the university, too. The upshot was that on January 28, 1857, in the statehouse in Iowa City (today called Old Capitol), Governor James Grimes signed a bill, Senate File 77, establishing a publicly funded State Historical Society of Iowa.

DAILY IOWA STATE DEMOCRAT, 11/4/1856


DEMOCRATS

TO THE POLLS, TO THE POLLS.
And Clear the Decks for a Brilliant Victory!!

*"Yankee Doodle an a bend,
 It is as plain as figures—
 BUCHANAN is the WHITE MAN'S friend
 And Fremont goes for the NIGGERS!"*

IN FAVOR OF Universal Education, Equal Rights, Free Suffrage, the Union of the States, the People of Kansas making their own laws, **WHITE MEN** governing America—and

OPPOSED TO Negro Suffrage, Amalgamation, Black Republicanism, Political Priests' Beecher-Rile Companies, Bloody Fights in Kansas, Negro Equality, and Negro Rights in general.



White Men's Democratic Ticket.

FOR PRESIDENT
JAMES BUCHANAN,
OF PENNSYLVANIA.
FOR VICE PRESIDENT,
JOHN C. BRECKINRIDGE,

Davenport's Daily Iowa State Democrat published this blatantly racist ad for the "White Men's" ticket right before Election Day, 1856.

But that late January day had not yet ended. Elsewhere in the stately limestone building, delegates called together to write a new state constitution voted on a resolution brimming with portents. They instructed their Committee on Education and School Lands to consider "making provision for the education of the children of blacks and mulattoes." John Parvin, the delegate offering this successful resolution, hailed from Muscatine. In his desk was a petition he would spring on his fellow delegates within a few days.

The petition had originated in a recent meeting at Muscatine's African American church. Its black signatories strongly objected to the exclusion of black children from Iowa's publicly funded schools. And, while they were at it, they also demanded political equality with whites, the vote and "all the [other] rights and privileges of citizenship."

Muscatine's black community provided Iowa's most dynamic expressions of black agency. Its story began with the Mathews clan, newly freed slaves brought from Maryland by their former owner as sawmill workers. A few years later the figure destined to be the state's foremost black activist, Pennsylvania-born Alexander Clark, arrived in Muscatine as a teenager. Within a decade he had expanded from barbering into real estate and other successful local ventures.

In 1848, in a show of solidarity with similar communities all across the northern states, Muscatine's blacks began celebrating West Indian Emancipation Day each August as an ironic protest against the continued existence of slavery in the United States. In 1851 they built an African Methodist Episcopal church, one of the very first established anywhere in the trans-Mississippi West.

Four years later they addressed their first petition to the Iowa legislature, asking relief from an unjust abridgement of their civil liberties. In 1856 they petitioned the General Assembly a second time, again asking for the repeal of discriminatory legislation. By then they had persuaded many of their white friends and well-wishers to join in; the document, organized by Alexander Clark, carried the names of 122 Muscatine males, white as well as black. In 1857, as noted, they

petitioned again, with 129 Muscatine whites sending along a parallel petition. The first name on the white petition is that of the immigrant Irishman Henry O'Connor, who would become an outspoken advocate of black citizenship well into the postwar era.

With strong support from the larger community, Muscatine's African Americans gained a persuasive voice in the coming discourse about the civil equality of blacks, the question of African American equality before the law. Nationally, this was a key "wedge issue," an ancillary to the slavery question that would divide white America long after slavery ceased to exist.

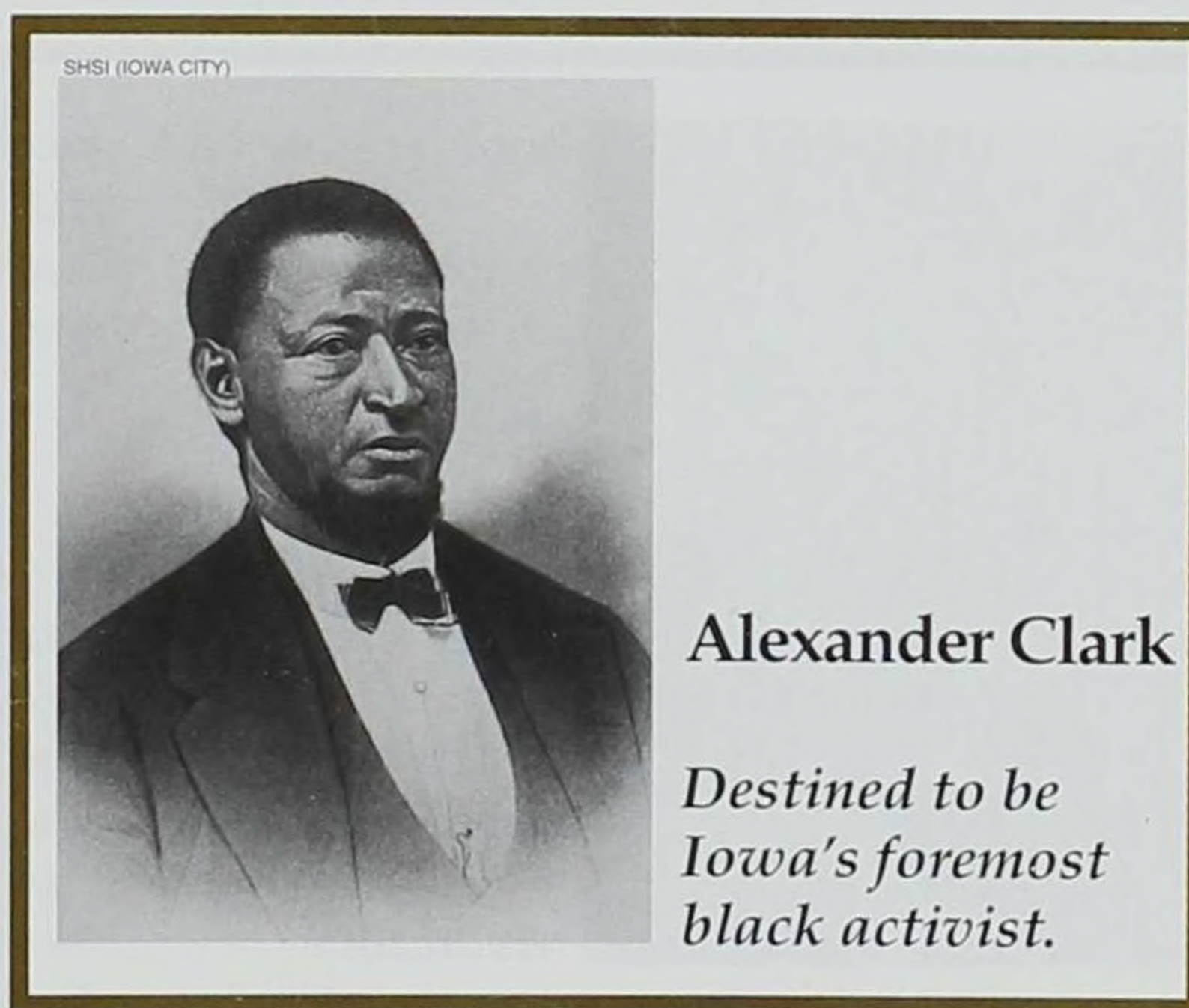
On a humid August day in 1857, with rain predicted, some 80,000 white male Iowans went to the polls to decide whether to extend voting rights (thus full citizenship) to black Iowans. A crushing majority—a super-landslide, 85 percent—said No.

That 1857 outcome hardly needs explanation. Attitudes toward slavery aside, the Midwest in the middle of the 19th century was notoriously racist, antebellum Iowa arguably the most racist of all. In fact, it may well have been the most racist state in the Union outside the South.

Iowa's 1838/39 "black code," as it was called, reads like that of a slave state. It banned interracial marriage, forced black residents to post bond for good behavior, disallowed black testimony in litigation involving whites, excluded black children from the public schools, excluded

people of color from welfare benefits, from practicing law, from being counted in state censuses, from being considered in legislative apportionment, from serving in the militia, from sitting in the legislature, and—most important of all—from voting.

And then there are the "onlys," "firsts," and "worsts." In the 1840s Iowa was the only free state whose legislators refused to support the Wilmot Proviso, a congressional measure that would have banned slavery from the West. In 1850 it was the only free state whose U.S. senators both voted for the notorious Fugi-



tive Slave Law, which forced northerners to collaborate in catching runaways from the South. In 1851 it was the first state to pass an act forbidding entry to African American migrants. Then its 1857 vote came within a half percentage point of being the worst referendum defeat for equal rights on record.

From 1857, flash forward eleven years to a chilly November day in 1868. By then almost all of Iowa's black code restrictions had gone by the board. But African American men still did not have that ultimate badge of citizenship: the right to vote. An 1868 ballot proposition aimed to grant it. Over 200,000 white male Iowans cast ballots on the question. This time a solid majority—57 percent—said Yes. Not bad: from 15 percent Yes to 57 percent Yes in little over a decade.

Though not many today realize it (including most Iowans), the Hawkeye State's 1868 equal suffrage referendum is an extraordinary event in the history of race relations in America.

No, there was nothing new and different about holding referendums on equal rights. Various free states and territories held about two dozen such referendums in the years before the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution banned whiteness as a voting qualification. But what makes Iowa's two black suffrage votes unique is that while its 1857 referendum was one of the worst defeats on record, the 1868 proposition was the only success anywhere in open political combat, in a straightforward popular vote.

What requires explanation is that 1868 victory for civil rights. Maybe it was just a fluke? No way. It was an oddity, but it was no accident. Iowa became almost uniquely "liberal" in the aftermath of the Civil War. In 1867 it was the second state in the Union to desegregate public schools, second only to progressive Massachusetts. In 1873 Iowa's Supreme Court struck down segregated public accommodations. In so doing it em-

ployed a definition of racial equality far in advance of its time. In 1880 Iowans for a third time voted on an equal rights question, this time on opening the legislature to African Americans. That proposition won by 63 percent—the largest majority ever recorded for any 19th-century equal rights proposition.

Well, everybody says, Iowa probably had few black residents. That's true; as late as 1880 black Iowans totaled less than 1 percent of the population. But so what? No northern state save New Jersey had a black population of as much as 3 percent. Besides, the tiny percentage of Iowa's blacks in 1857 was about the same as it was in 1868—so that can't account for the vastly different white voting behavior.

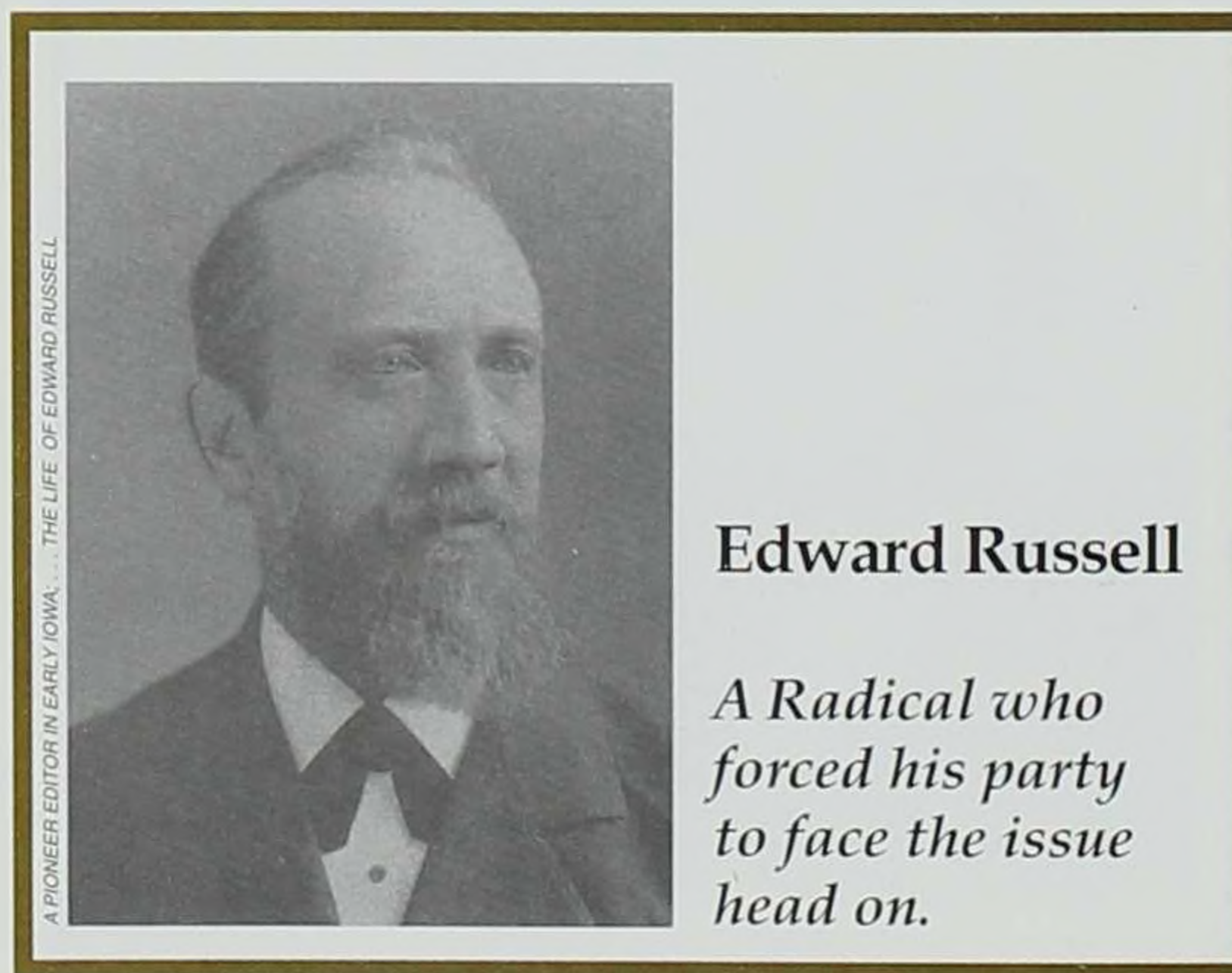
The 1857 outcome came to be reversed by the 1868 outcome mainly, it seems to me, because of four factors. The first factor was the lethal impact of the Civil War. Virtually half the white population of military age in Iowa donned blue uniforms and went south to fight for the Union.

With them went Iowa's own black regiment, the 60th U.S. Colored Infantry, its battle flag sewn by the black women of Muscatine and Keokuk. All its officers, in accord with War Department policy, were white, but its top enlisted man, its sergeant-major, would have been Alex Clark. But the military doctors refused him because of a bad leg.

In all, of the 76,000 Iowans who left home nearly one-fifth never came back. A larger proportion of Iowa servicemen met death than did the fighting men of most loyal states. Although hard to measure, it seems clear that few Iowans were in

any mood to indulge the defeated South in its impulse to continue slavery under some other name. And that the state's own black community had contributed a fighting regiment to the cause spoke eloquently to the issue of African American citizenship.

The second factor was that Iowa's early Republicans "had the right stuff." As a preliminary note, to understand the political context of the time, the most important thing to know is that in the last 150 years the two major political parties have switched positions.



Edward Russell

A Radical who forced his party to face the issue head on.

Until the mid-20th century, it was the Democrats who were the economic conservatives, freaks about local control, hostile to equal rights. In contrast, it was the Republicans who were development-minded, champions of social reform, unafraid of big government.

But the politics of race changed all that. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s, which began paying attention to black poverty and to some civil rights demands, detached African Americans from their traditional loyalty to the party of Abraham Lincoln and moved them into the Democratic Party. After World War II the Democrats embraced the broad-based civil rights movement that climaxed in the 1960s, thereby chasing white southerners out of their party. Since then the socially conservative "solid South" has been not Democratic, but Republican. And as the South goes, so goes the Grand Old Party.

In Iowa in those days virtually no support for social justice ever came from the state's Democratic Party and its in-your-face racism.

The third factor was that the Republicans carried the election of 1865. During the Civil War's final months the question of black voting rights stirred America. It was widely acknowledged that the ex-slaves of the South would have to be politically empowered so as to protect themselves from some form of re-enslavement. Yet, Republicans asked themselves, how could black suffrage be honestly forced on the South when several northern states didn't allow African Americans to vote?

Here was a dilemma. Pushing for black enfranchisement in the North would very likely cause a white backlash and huge Republican losses. Most everywhere the party of Lincoln pushed the panic button. In some northern states, moreover, top Republicans were proving as negative on black citizenship as Democrats. In Ohio, for example, the leading Republican candidate for governor said he'd simply reject the nomination should his party dare include an equal suffrage plank

in its platform. And he sent his campaign manager to see that it never happened. It didn't. He got elected. And black citizenship in Ohio never had much of a chance in the early postwar years.

In Iowa the issue took a much different turn. In 1865 Edward Russell, a British-born Davenport editor, a Radical, forced his party to face the issue head on. Two months after Lee's surrender the Republicans held their state convention. Nearly 700 of them met in Des Moines, probably the largest public gathering in the history of the state at that time. Russell, a delegate, got on the platform committee. But he found the committee majority deathly afraid of straightforwardly endorsing equal rights. So he offered an amendment to the platform

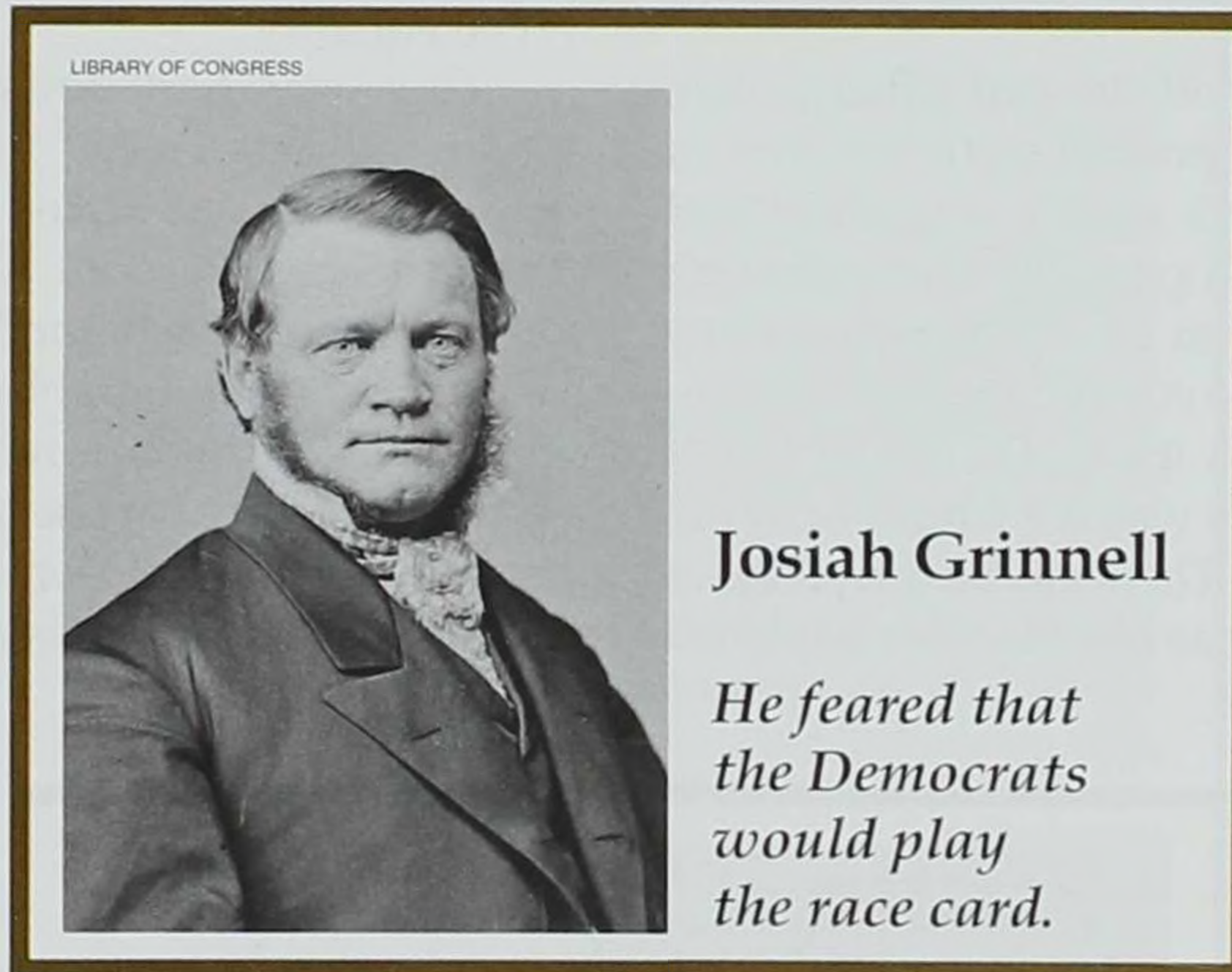
from the convention floor: "we are in favor of amending the Constitution of our State by striking out the word 'white' in the article on suffrage."

This set off an uproar. Several delegates urged Russell to withdraw his motion. He refused. In the ensuing debate, two Iowa congressmen, the highest-ranking pols there in Des Moines that day, faced off on the Russell amendment.

Josiah Grinnell spoke for the fearful. Grinnell was born and raised in New England, a clergyman, lawyer, and gentleman farmer. In the 1850s he came west and became one of Iowa's most respected antislavery activists. Elected to the wartime Congress, he was the only consistent Radical among Iowa's U.S. senators and representatives. As such he urged that southern blacks be granted the vote.

But when it came to his own state, Grinnell was what psychologist Robert Merton terms a "nonprejudiced discriminator"—that is, despite an apparent lack of prejudiced feelings, he supported racial discrimination for contingent reasons. He was, in other words, not exactly a profile in courage.

Grinnell said he opposed Russell's amendment not from a belief in black inferiority but because, if passed, the Democrats would respond by playing the race card. That would surely cost the Republicans the upcoming gubernatorial election.



Josiah Grinnell

He feared that the Democrats would play the race card.

Grinnell's congressional colleague, Hiram Price, then jumped to his feet. Born a Pennsylvania farm boy, Price was now a wealthy, highly respected banker and railroad capitalist in Davenport. Like so many of Iowa's best Radicals, he was a converted Democrat. At the convention he served with Russell in the Scott County delegation. His colleagues' treatment of Russell fired him up.

Price unleashed ferocious off-the-cuff remarks that, as one conventioneer put it, "poured forth in a torrent of righteous indignation." The speech was short and to the point: "The Republican party is strong enough to dare to do right, and cannot afford now, or at any other time, to shirk a duty. The colored men, North and South, were loyal and true to the Government in the days of its greatest peril. There was not a rebel or a traitor to be found among them. They ask the privilege of citizenship now that slavery has been forever banished from our country.

"Why should the great freedom-loving State of Iowa longer deny them this right? Not one reason can be given that has not been used to bolster up slavery for the past hundred years. The war just closed has swept that relic of barbarism from our land; let the Republican party have the courage to do justice.

"I have no fear of the result in a contest of this kind. We shall carry the election and have the satisfaction of wiping out the last vestige of the black code that has long been a disgrace to our State."

Recalled an awestruck witness, "The timid delegates were shamed into silence." As another phrased it: "The Convention . . . being unwilling to stand committed even in appearance against the principle of negro suffrage, adopted the amendment by a large majority, and the universal expression of the delegates . . . was that inasmuch as the issue must be squarely met, it might as well be met this year as next."

The conventioners, as would be said today, front-loaded the unexpected issue into gubernatorial politics. Surprised Republican voters across the state suddenly learned of the issue within the next few days from their newspapers.

It had been a brave—if impetuous—action. But two months later political courage began to ebb when the Democrats fielded what one of them proudly called a "white man's ticket." They designed it to appeal to racists of both parties, especially demobilized soldiers, whose experiences in the South led them—or at least some so thought—to be especially hostile to racial equality.

Thus was born Iowa's short-lived "Union Anti-Negro Suffrage Party." Its nominee for governor was, of course, an outspoken white supremacist, Colonel Thomas Hart Benton, Jr., a nephew of the famous Democratic U.S. senator from Missouri.

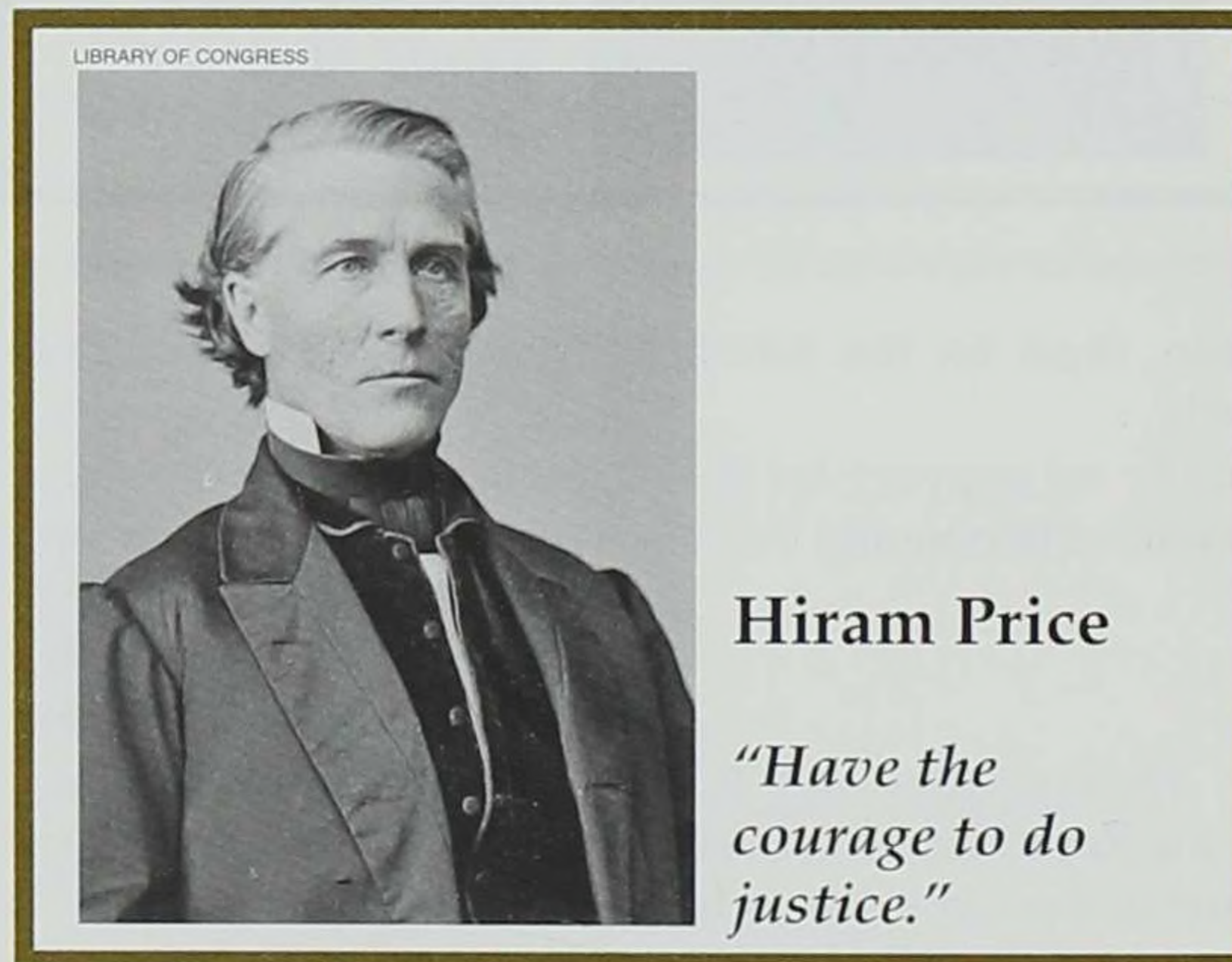
But Iowa's Republican candidate, running for a second term, was a remarkable man who deserves far more honor than he's ever been given. Like Price he was a converted Democrat; like Price and Grinnell he'd helped found the state's Republican Party. Colonel William Stone then

fought gallantly in the Civil War, returning home a badly wounded survivor of General Ulysses Grant's vast frontal assault on Vicksburg. Stone, who had stared directly into the face of death, was not about to run scared.

Neither was another military hero, Marcellus Crocker, who came out of the war as Iowa's most prestigious fighting general. Before tragically dying of tuberculosis that summer General Crocker urged that Stone be aggressive: "We must meet

this question," he forcefully advised, ". . . in such a manner as will insure the Right to prevail; and the sooner we do it, and the bolder we do it, the better."

Governor Stone complied. In his campaign he candidly admitted that he used to be a racial conservative. "I was so conservative," he said, "[that] I did not endorse Lincoln's preparatory proclamation of emancipation as heartily as many did . . . although by the time when he issued the final proclamation I was fully prepared to sustain it." He had also been, as a conservative, against putting African Americans into uniform, as many Radicals urged. But it had been ordered. Now he believed that "if they would take out of the war what the black men had done . . . as guides,



teamsters, mechanics, laborers, and soldiers, the war would still be raging."

Stone admitted that he had doubted the wisdom of Ed Russell's amendment. Yet it was a *fait accompli* and within two weeks he had embraced the challenge it posed. He had also voted against black suffrage back in 1857, he said, but he'd since changed his mind.

Stone then discovered how effectively America's cherished ideals could be harnessed to equal rights. In a campaign face-off he cornered his racist opponent into objecting to the phrase "all men are equal before the law." "Well," said Stone, "this is the first time I ever heard an American citizen state that he did not believe in the equality of all men before the law." The audience exploded in applause.

Twenty years earlier, only the far-left "antislavery constitutionalists," as historians know them, had argued that the Founding Fathers had been deliberately abolitionist. Now that idea became the common currency of Stone's discourse. "I say that we [Republicans] carried out the spirit of the Declaration of Independence," Stone said, again to applause, "in that resolution, when we said that 'all men were equal before the law.' We stand where Madison and Franklin and Jefferson stood, when we asserted that 'all men are equal before the law.' We stand where stood the framers of the federal Constitution and where the men stood who fought the battles of the Revolution. . . . I tell you this principle that all men are equal, comes from the Almighty God Himself, and it must and will prevail."

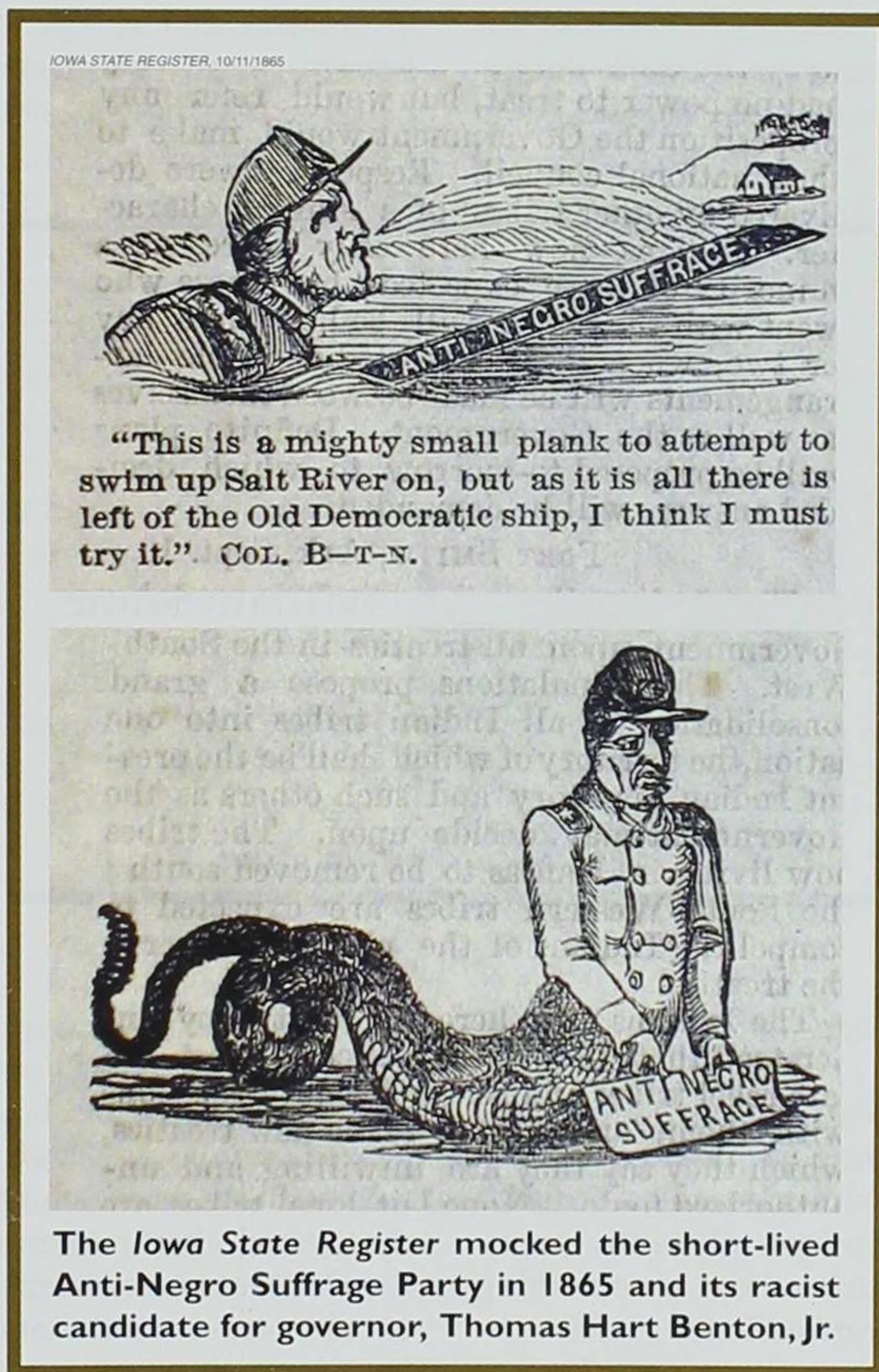
Governor Stone won reelection with a comfortable 56 percent of the vote. Reflected a Sioux City edi-

tor: "Stone has been elected upon the 'negro suffrage' platform . . . and therefore we may regard the popular opinion of the State as expressed in favor of the extension of the rights of citizenship to the black man. The contest is passed, the victory won."

Well, not quite. In states such as Ohio the question of black citizenship could go directly to voters in an up-or-down referendum once a legislative session gave the go-ahead. Not so in the Hawkeye State. Iowa required passage by two successive sessions before going to a referendum vote.

Aided by three petitions from Muscatine (two black, one white), impartial suffrage carried the 1866 legislature. Governor Stone, retiring from politics, then handed off the issue to a second Iowa ex-colonel who took command at the statehouse. In his inaugural speech Governor Samuel Merrill, echoing Stone's agenda, addressed the Republican rank-and-file. He ordered them to ignore the recent defeat of rights referendums in Connecticut, Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Kansas, and Colorado. Iowa, he said, must neither "emulate their cowardice nor share in their dishonor." Strong words indeed.

A newly elected legislature would again have to approve the question. Once again Muscatine's civil rights activists spoke up, prompting a meeting in Des Moines—on Lincoln's birthday, pointedly enough—of African American leaders and white supporters from all over the state. Eloquent speeches by Alexander Clark and Henry O'Connor, Iowa's new attorney general, preceded a petition addressed "To the People of Iowa," penned by Clark and signed by the black conventioners. "We claim to be of that number comprehended in the Declaration of Independence," it said,



The Iowa State Register mocked the short-lived Anti-Negro Suffrage Party in 1865 and its racist candidate for governor, Thomas Hart Benton, Jr.

"and . . . entitled not only to life, but to equal rights in the pursuit and securing of happiness and in the choice of those who are to rule over us."

Finally, just before the November 1868 referendum, word came from the late war's most famous living celebrity, General Grant, the Republican presidential nominee that year. As quoted by an interviewer, Grant said he "hoped the people of Iowa . . . would be the first State to carry impartial suffrage through unflinchingly." It had been defeated elsewhere, he said, "but he trusted that Iowa, the bright Radical star, would proclaim by its action . . . that the North is consistent with itself, and willing to voluntarily accept what its Congress had made a necessity in the South."

Iowans, as already explained, did as they were told.

Finally, the fourth factor why the 1857 defeat of the black suffrage vote was reversed in 1868 was that white Americans can be induced to "do the right thing."

It seems to me that this slice of Iowa's political history reflects something very important about the underlying nature of white racism in America. What it implies is that most whites are not inherently prejudiced about people of color, that racism is something other than bred in the bones, carried in the genes.

Interestingly enough, a generation of social scientists agreed. In the mid-20th century they probed the psychology of white racial attitudes and behavior. What they discovered was that any statistically average white population will not test out as uniformly prejudiced, but instead divide into three groups. About 15 percent will prove to be deep-seated racists, folks so prejudiced that changing their behavior and attitudes probably requires individual psychotherapy.

About 25 percent will prove to be committed egalitarians who will consistently support justice and equality for nonwhites, no matter what the context.

That leaves the majority—about 60 percent. These whites have no strong feelings one way or another,

but will simply go along with the crowd. They'll be racist or egalitarian depending on what they think is expected.

This 60 percent middle group has been labeled the "conforming majority." Its behavior will be dictated by the messages received from respected authority figures.

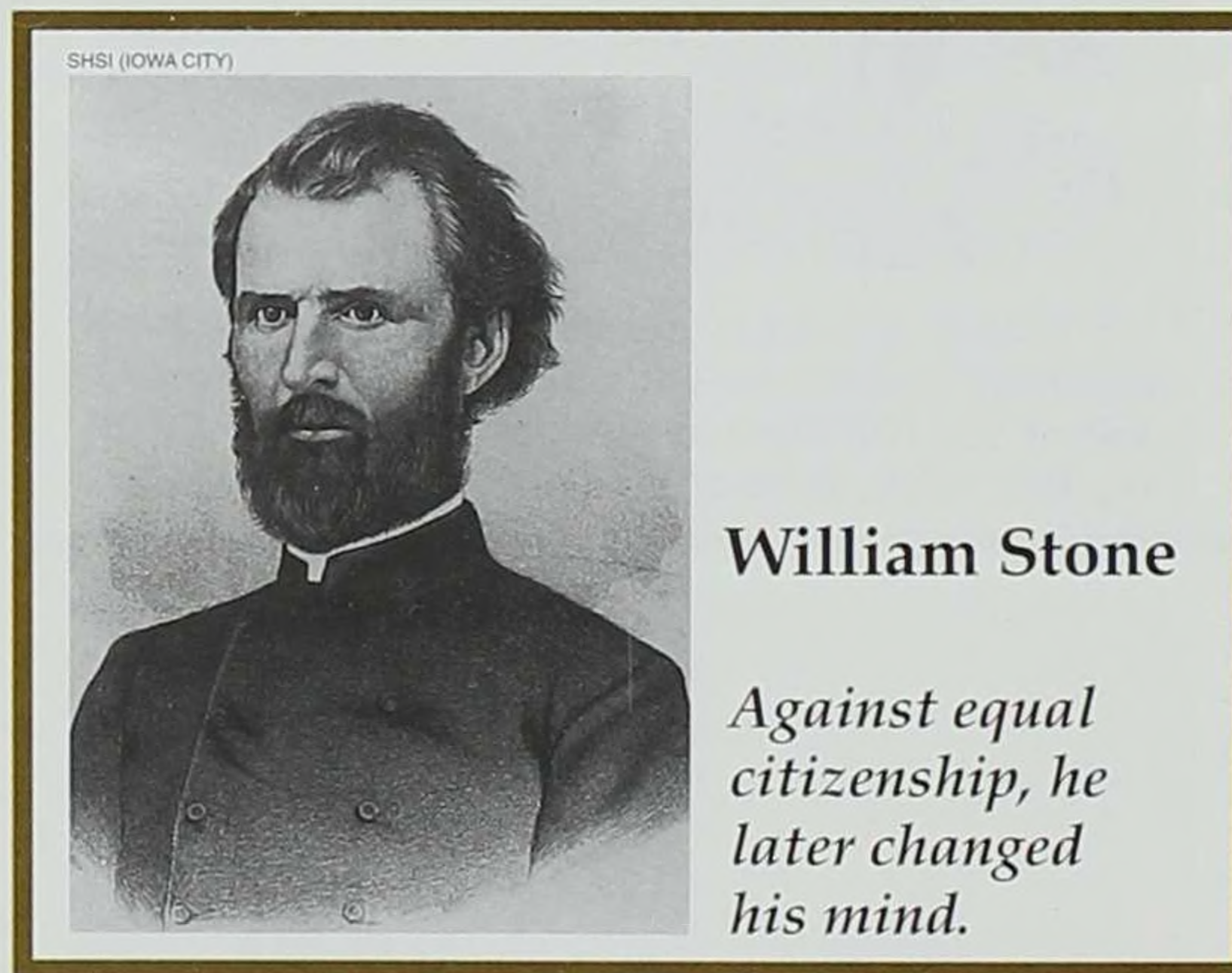
As an excellent example, take Americans' attitudes toward interracial marriage. As late as 1963 almost half the states had laws on the books that forbade marriage between blacks and whites.

And a solid two-thirds of Americans favored such laws against interracial marriage. But four years later the lofty justices of the United States Supreme Court struck down all those laws. Polled again on the issue, two-thirds now agreed that people should marry whomever they wanted, irrespective of race. That dramatic turnabout was not magic, just basic social psychology.

In 19th-century Iowa, men like Congressman Price, Governors Stone

and Merrill, and General Ulysses Grant were, at least among Republicans, enormously respected. When they spoke, the Republican majority, the rank-and-file, heard and obeyed. And nothing worked so wonderfully with this conforming majority, as Governor Stone discovered, than reference to that most quoted line in the Declaration of Independence: "all men are created equal." Never mind that its author was a slave-owner; his words possessed a majestic life of their own, resonating through the 19th century as sacred gospel, as literally the truth. Indeed, they became the ideological basis of the antislavery crusade and the 20th-century civil rights movement.

But, noted the psychologists, the best way to bring white behavior into line with egalitarian principles is simply to spring a new policy on the conforming majority without warning. At first there is anger, surprise, and grumbling, but the 60 percent soon comes around, falls into line, gets with the program. General Crocker intuitively sensed this truth when he wrote (as quoted earlier): "We must meet this question . . . and the sooner we do it, and the *bolder* we do it, the better."



Governor Stone was a conformer, not a Radical or a committed egalitarian. When Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation, Stone was against it. But within three months he bought in. He had been against enlisting black troops, but once the War Department endorsed the idea Stone dutifully saluted. In 1857 he had opposed equal citizenship, and when the 1865 convention passed the Russell amendment, he thought it a big mistake. But within two weeks he was on the team, ready to step up to the plate.

As with Stone, so also with thousands of Iowa's conforming Republicans. In 1857 they said No to black suffrage—because the party bigwigs deemed it not ready for prime time, and they said as much. Eleven years later they voted Yes to black suffrage—because the Republican bigwigs told them to do it.

The behavior of only a minority of these Iowans (as many as 25 percent?) rose from strongly held egalitarian convictions. Instead, the political successes of 1865 and 1868 were primarily due to the conversion of the conforming majority by the courage of leaders, by the impress of party loyalty and discipline, and by the fact that Iowans' racial prejudices were a little like the proverbial Platte River: a mile wide and an inch deep, visible but deceptively shallow.

I suppose we may wonder "what might have been" if all America was Iowa in the 1860s. As it happened, of course, equal rights lingered on as a bitter, even murderous issue, especially (but by no means exclusively) in the old Confederate states, where black subjection was thought as necessary to the southern economy of the postwar as of the pre-war years. In thousands of localities black civil equality did not finally materialize until a century after slavery's demise.

Today the emblems of interracial progress are plainly visible. Now we are seeing not the first generation of powerful African Americans, but the second. A second U.S. Secretary of State is black. A second U.S. Supreme Court justice is black. The second black governor ever elected holds office in Boston. Nationwide, 93 percent of registered voters tell pollsters they would support a qualified African American for president. And the second black man ever to mount a plausible campaign for the White House is testing that proposition. But . . . the black Ninth Ward of New Orleans remains a pathetic wasteland. There are more African American males in prison than in college. There are inner-city schools where, as Barack Obama tells us, the

rats outnumber the classroom computers. All of these facts remind us that some devastating combination of race, poverty, and official negligence won't yield to a simple up-or-down vote. There no longer seem to be unequivocal policy fixes, as there were as late as the 1960s.

Still, it's always good—perhaps it's even necessary—to have positive examples to encourage us. And the circumstances, the processes, and the strategies that won frontier Iowans to the civil equality of blacks remind us that there are egalitarian precedents as well as a racist tradition in America's past. ❖

*Robert R. Dykstra presented these remarks in the Old Capitol in Iowa City on February 7, 2007, marking the sesquicentennial of the State Historical Society of Iowa. They are excerpts from his book *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier*. A native Iowan and a former professor of history at the University of Iowa, he is emeritus professor of history and public policy at the State University of New York at Albany.*

NOTE ON SOURCES

For the full story of Iowa's encounter with black civil equality, from the 1830s through 1880, see Robert R. Dykstra, *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993; paperback edition, Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1997). The book includes the first full history of Iowa's antislavery movement, as well as the only study so far published for any state of grass-roots voting support for and against black civil equality. For another summary of some of the material see Dykstra, "Iowans and the Politics of Race in America, 1857–1880," in *Iowa History Reader*, ed. Marvin Bergman (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996).