



John H. Harapp

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GENERAL JOHN H. KNAPP, THE FIRST PERMANENT SETTLER OF FORT MADISON, IOWA.

BY HENRY E. KNAPP, MENOMONIE, WIS.

On May 30, 1791, there was born in Goshen, Orange, New York, to Jabez and Hannah Holly Knapp, a son whom they named John Holly. He was the sixth of ten children, eight of whom were daughters. As a young man he learned the saddle maker's trade. During the War of 1812 he served as Lieutenant in Captain F. Tuthill's Company of New York State Militia from September 8 to December 12, 1814.

On January 21, 1813, he was united in marriage with Harriet Seely of Orange county, New York, where the Seely family has been prominent for over a hundred years. About 1818 they moved to Elmira, New York, living first in that part of the town south of the Chemung river, which was called Southport. They soon moved across the river to Newtown, as the main part of Elmira was then called. He engaged in merchandising, having a store in Newtown in 1819. He built a grist mill on Seely Creek near Bulkhead in 1820 and was one of the directors of the bridge company incorporated for the purpose of building the first bridge across the Chemung river at what is now Lake street.

He was Brigadier General of the New York State Militia, and was familiarly known as General Knapp. He joined Union Lodge No. 30, A. F. & A. M. (now 95), receiving the Master's degree April 25, 1823. He joined Elmira Chapter of Royal Arch Masons, in 1825, his signature to the by-laws appearing on December 21, 1825, the only place it is known to exist.

He was largely interested in Blossburg coal properties, and was one of the persons named in an act of the New York legislature, April 9, 1823, organizing The Tioga Coal and Iron Mining & Manufacturing Co. He moved to Blossburg about 1825 and managed the coal mining of the company until cheated out of his interest by a man he had supposed was his friend. At Blossburg he built a large hotel and a store, both of which he conducted until he left in the fall of 1830 for the West. He went via Penn Yan and Buffalo to the Mississippi River, and down that stream to New Orleans, where he spent two winters as manager of a large saddle manufactory.

He returned up the river early in the spring of 1832 and went as far north as the boats ran, probably to Fort Snelling. When passing the site of old Fort Madison, which had been built in 1808 and destroyed in 1813, he was much pleased with the location, which has often been described as the most beautiful on the river.

Not having seen another site that pleased him so well he ascertained from the steamboat captain, who knew almost everyone and everything along the river, that Augustus Horton, then living on the large island a few miles down the river, had made some sort of a claim to the land where the old fort had stood, but had not taken possession or lived there. He bought this claim of Horton, took possession at once and began the erection of the first building in the new Fort Madison. In the meantime he went up the river, took part in the Black Hawk War and was at Rock Island when the treaty was made. The building he erected in 1832 was located on the bank of the river just below where Morrison's Plow works now stand.

This he utilized as an Indian supply store until he sold it to Judge Cutler. He went to Quincy late in the fall of 1832 and spent the winter with his cousin Nathaniel Knapp, who was keeping a hotel.

He returned to Ft. Madison early in the spring of 1833, accompanied by Nathaniel Knapp, who also settled there. The same spring there came and settled Peter Williams, J.

Horton, Augustus Horton, Richard Chaney, Aaron White and Zack Hawkins.

In 1835 he built a residence of hewed logs utilizing for it one of the stone chimneys of the old fort. The old well of the fort was still there. This he cleaned out and it has been in use ever since. During the time that elapsed before he sent for his family he had with him as cook, William Smoot, whom he brought from New Orleans. He also built a new store in front of the fort site, not far from his house, and here as in the first store he had a nice trade with the Sac and Fox Indians. Black Hawk was a frequent customer and Keokuk an occasional one, the latter being the principal chief of the Sac and Foxes.

In August, 1835, the Knapp family left Blossburg, Pa., to join the General in their new home. They went via Penn Yan, New York, where the oldest daughter was living with her husband, Joseph C. Douglass, (a threshing machine maker) and their children, George, two and a half years old and Mary, aged one year, who accompanied Mrs. Knapp to the west. At Buffalo Mrs. Knapp and daughter Elizabeth took passage on a boat for Chicago, where they awaited the coming of the others, who drove all the way in a wagon drawn by a good team of horses. The Knapp family which made the trip consisted of Mrs. Harriet Seely Knapp and daughters, Almeda Ann (Mrs. Douglass), aged twenty-two, Elizabeth, eighteen, and sons, Jonas, aged fourteen and John, ten years. The oldest son, William, remained with his uncle, Benaiah Seely, in Orange, New York.

On October 8th they reached the Mississippi at Spillman's Ferry, now Dallas, Illinois, then followed the river a few miles to what is now Appanoose, where they stayed over night at the house of Aaron White, who owned and operated a flat boat ferry propelled by oars, on which next morning they were ferried over the "Father of Waters". They landed near Black Hawk Heights and after traveling an hour or so over a rough trail reached their new home in Fort Madison, Friday, October 9, 1835. They had made a quick trip, being only six weeks enroute.

In 1835-6 General Knapp built a large hotel near his residence. It could accommodate about fifty guests with rooms and had an assembly room about twenty by forty feet in size. It was named Madison House, and was the first hotel built there. Another was built about the same time by Nathaniel Knapp, who named his hotel Washington House. Both hotels prospered for travel soon became heavy. As many as one hundred teams sometimes stood in line on the Illinois shore waiting to cross on the flatboat ferry. This was very slow work as only two teams could cross at one time and consequently they had often to wait more than a day. General Knapp also built a stable to hold twenty-four horses and then a lean-to addition for twelve more, and this was often full of the teams of emigrants.

In June, 1835, General Knapp, assisted by Nathaniel Knapp, laid out the town of Fort Madison. As there was some question as to the title of the land the Government relocated the town in 1840 on the same lot lines, and the titles to these lots came from the United States direct.

During these early days the First Dragoons U. S. A. were stationed at Fort Des Moines, now Montrose, and the officers were frequent visitors with General Knapp. Among them were General Brown, General Parrott and Lieutenant Robert E. Lee (later General in C. S. A.) Among the other visitors were Black Hawk and his son Nes-se-as-kuk, who was about the age of Jonas and John Knapp, and liked to come and play with them. Black Hawk liked to talk with the General, but did not often condescend to talk with the boys, though occasionally he would take notice of them and tell them of the arts of hunting game and relate stories of the chase and of war. He was not averse to coming around to the back door and asking for food.

In January 2, 1837, a reception and New Year's ball was given in the Madison House to General John H. Knapp. While attending this he caught cold and died two days later of quinsy. His grave and monument are in the southeast corner of the cemetery at Fort Madison. He was the first buried there.

The year 1837 was disastrous to the Knapp family. On July 13th, Nathaniel Knapp was killed by Hendershot at Bentsport* and Joseph S. Douglass, a son-in-law, died in November of typhoid fever.

For a few months after the death of the General, his son-in-law, Joseph S. Douglass, managed the Madison House, and on his death Mrs. Knapp rented it to Lorenzo Bullard who kept it until he moved to Menomonie, Wis., in 1845; then it was run a year or two by Mr. Cope, after which it was sold to Daniel McConn for four thousand dollars.

After the death of the General, Mrs. Knapp and sons, Jonas and John, lived a short time on the farm of her son-in-law, Judge Henry Eno, just out of town, while a house was being built on the farm the General had entered, one and a half miles west of Fort Madison. As soon as the house was ready they moved into it and lived there many years. Jonas bought out the interest of his mother and brother John and still owns the farm. After her sons, Jonas and John, were married, Mrs. Knapp spent part of her time with each and with her daughter Mrs. Douglass until 1863, after which date she made her home with her son John at Menomonie, Wis. where she died Feb. 28, 1884, at the ripe old age of ninety-two years and eight days.

*—This tragedy was one of the most noted in early southeastern Iowa. The following letter from Harriet Knapp, widow of Nathaniel Knapp to her brother-in-law, Samuel Knapp, gives the details as she received them, and other family matter.—Editor.

Fort Madison, Aug. 29, 1837.

Dear Brother.—I received your letter three days ago but I have not been able to write before. Myself and children are well at present but, Samuel, how shall I tell you that your brother is dead. He was stabbed by one Hendershot. Nathaniel went to Desmoines river to take some horses. Son Charles was with him. When coming home they stopped at a house where there was not any chairs. Nathaniel who sat on the bed would not move as soon as Hendershot wanted him to, and he stabbed Nathaniel to the heart. He lived one hour. It was on the 13th of July. I have three more children; the oldest we call Mary; the other Eliza; the boy, born August 10th, is three weeks old and I call him Nathaniel.

HARRIET KNAPP.

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