The McPhersons: A Five-Generational Study of a Family's Migration and Idealism

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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Americans have been traditionally depicted as an idealistic people. The Pilgrims and Puritans left the persecution of the aristocratic and conservative Old World to begin a new Israel in North America. Others, for both ideological and economic reasons, followed. Yet, whether these immigrants sought religious freedom, land, or economic opportunities, all held to the common belief that America was a land of hitherto unknown opportunity.

Perhaps the greatest evidence of this American sense of opportunity is apparent in the Westward movement. Migrations of people were not a new phenomenon, but the American movement to settle new Western lands was without historic precedent. By the mid eighteenth century, thousands of Americans were moving to the western fringe, the southern valleys and, later, to the new lands of the Northwest Territory and beyond. They braved the danger of hostile Indians, the forces of nature, and the harshness of a move to settle the American frontier, compelled often by a desire for land, a wish to preserve a traditional way of life, or a hope to promote religious faith.

There is a prevailing impression that most of the Americans who moved West did so for economic reasons. But not all of them uprooted from what was familiar and risked the dangers and the hardships of settling in again with only the expectation of acquiring better land. For some American families, like the McPhersons, decisions to move were prompted by more than economics; they were also
rooted in the traditions of religious faith and the importance of the family.

At least one of these three factors would motivate the first five generations of these Quakers to move. Indeed, they would move nearly every generation to acquire land, distance themselves from areas of social conflict, or to preach the faith. Each motive was inextricably linked to a concern for the welfare of the family. Consequently, these five McPhersons' decisions to move and the religious and familial traditions they fostered would affect even the generations that succeeded them.

Daniel, the first of this American family, arrived in the new land in 1696, but he did not deliberately come to improve his opportunities and raise a family. Living in an era when profiteers could make handsome sums by supplying cheap labor to the colonies, Daniel had been abducted from his home in the Scottish Highlands to be sold as an indentured servant.

In one account of the kidnapping, the fifteen-year-old Daniel was tending his father's sheep near Moray Firth when some men overpowered him, forced him into a ship, and took him to New Castle, Delaware, where he was sold. [1] In a nineteenth-century history of the family by John C. McPherson, a similar version of the story is recounted. Daniel was walking on a wharf with some other boys when they were kidnapped, bound, and sailed to Philadelphia. Yet there is a possibility that Daniel was not kidnapped
at all. If Daniel's parents had been destitute, they may have sold him into temporary servitude so he could survive and have an opportunity to change the course of his life in America. [2] Or, as was the case with other young men of the period, Daniel himself may have been enticed by tales of adventure in America, signed up as an indentee, and discovered too late what he had capriciously done. [3] In his mind, being forced to uphold the bargain would have been synonymous with kidnapping. [4]

Daniel survived the long and typically unsanitary voyage to America. But he was not alone, for by the 1690s half of the men arriving in Philadelphia were indentured, bound to serve a minimum of four years. [5] Although his situation was not ideal, it is likely that Daniel quickly grew accustomed to life in New England during his years as a servant. The climate was not markedly different from his native Scotland, he understood the language, and he was surrounded by other middling people from western Europe. One novelty, however, was the area's religious pluralism, including the sectarian Quakers and Mennonites, as well as other protestant denominations like the Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and, to a lesser extent, Baptists. [6]

Most of the Pennsylvanian Quakers of the time were from Wales, western England, and the London area, so it is unlikely that the Scottish Daniel was Quaker before he arrived in the colony. His master may have been a Quaker
farmer who introduced him to the Society of Friends, or Daniel may have just been impressed by the sectarians' numbers, ideology and comparative wealth.

The sectarian "plain folk," especially the Quakers, constituted a majority during the colony's first forty years [7], giving the property-holding Quakers a large measure of control in the assembly. [8] And their standard of conduct in dedication to God and the "holy experiment" demanded the industriousness, frugality, devotion to family, and assistance to members that further distinguished them from the others and helped them acquire more wealth. [9] While Daniel may have admired these Quaker characteristics and their financial success, he must also have been sympathetic to their ideology. The notion of individuals', and ultimately society's, perfectibility, the presence of the Light within, and Christian companionship may have appealed to the young man who was searching for comfort in the new land.

By 1712, fourteen years after his arrival in America, Daniel had completed his contract as an indentured servant and had become a Quaker. In that year he married Ruth Shires, a young Pennsylvania Quaker woman of English descent. Because the Quakers placed considerable importance on a genuine Christian love between spouses and their duty of nurturing their children in the faith, the couple's intention to marry had to be approved by their meeting, the local organized congregation of the Society
of Friends. Daniel and Ruth were married only after successfully undergoing the scrutiny of special committees and obtaining the necessary permission.

After his marriage, Daniel continued farming which, of course, is what he had been doing in Pennsylvania since his arrival. John McPherson and others believe that William Penn, the proprietor of the Pennsylvania colony and largest landowner in the colonies, gave Daniel one hundred acres of land in Chester County near Philadelphia. In the colony's early years, Penn commonly gave settlers fifty acres of land [10], and indentured servants were often given a parcel after completing their contract. However, family tradition asserts that Daniel's case was special. Although no actual deed or land record has been found for the tract supposedly granted by Penn, there is said to be a letter written by Daniel to his parents stating that "William Penn having learned to know him and appreciate his good qualities had deeded him one hundred acres of land near Philadelphia where he lived". [11] John McPherson wrote that Daniel did indeed renew contact with his family when a kinsman found him in Pennsylvania.

Daniel's life as a Delaware Valley farmer in the first half of the eighteenth century was undoubtedly similar to that of the other Quaker farmers in the area. In the fertile valley, he cleared several acres of thick forest and operated a family farm. This was not a traditional subsistence farm, however. Compared with some
contemporary European agricultural regions, Pennsylvania was economically thriving [12], and with the help of his family and perhaps a few hired workers, Daniel grew wheat to sell at the expanding market. Commercial farming had by this period become common in the rural areas surrounding Philadelphia. Although money was scarce and banks had not yet been established, Daniel's crops were given a monetary value. [13] Thinking that financial success benefited members' children and also the larger society through benevolent projects, the Quakers supported such economic pursuits among their members. [14]

Daniel then worked primarily with his family in mind. In addition to providing for their basic existence, he sought to acquire enough landholdings and profit to offer a good start for his six children. His respect as a father, and, indeed, his standing in the community, depended on it.

As with Daniel, Ruth's duties as a wife were similar to those she had engaged in before her marriage. She had been trained from childhood to fulfill her female domestic role, knowing that she would eventually have her own family and household to care for. Eighteenth-century women were commonly restricted from making money, engaging in market transactions, and participating in politics. [15] While contemporary male writers such as Governor William Livingston of New Jersey idealized the woman's domestic sphere and activities, a twentieth-century
A historian of colonial women writes that "such a model of female perfection did not allow a woman an independent existence: ideally, she would maintain no identity separate from that of her male-defined family and her household responsibilities."[16] The home then was Ruth's world, for her sex virtually excluded her from the one beyond the farm and family.

And yet, while Ruth's social status was so limited, her religious position was not, for women could be spiritually equal to—if not better than—men. The Quakers were one of the first sects to acknowledge the importance of women in the church, ministry, and home. Women's meetings were institutionalized where, among other things, the women established young women's courting behavior, inspected ladies for marriage, discussed their role in the Quaker family, and selected their delegate to the quarterly women's meeting. The Quakers also encouraged active female participation in the ministry, and several respected female Quaker ministers travelled to other meetings and households to promote "Truth" and advise members. These female ministers had an unparalleled and church-sanctioned opportunity for mobility. They could leave the confines of the home to travel, and they were frequently courted and eventually married to the community's wealthiest Quaker men.[17]

The women's meetings and female ministers were not intended to revolutionize the women's social status,
however. Rather, they were primarily employed to elevate the spirituality of the individual Quaker women, for they were the Society's indispensable spiritual instructors of husbands and children: "Whether dealing with children, husbands, or an audience of listeners, the good Quaker woman was supposed to sanctify and harness her sexuality to the purposes of 'Truth' by becoming an embodiment of 'holy conversation' who tenderly answered the Light in others." [18] While Daniel's status within the community depended on his success in providing for his family, Ruth's status depended on her spiritual example and success in caring for her husband and in raising children who married and remained in the faith.

Unfortunately for the family, Ruth died in 1747. [19] The family unit she and Daniel had so painstakingly cultivated was no longer complete. Daniel did not ever fully recover from his wife's death and would often walk the several miles to Ruth's grave to pray. Occasionally he would pick a flower from the site and carry it back to his children as if symbolically to place Ruth among her loved ones.

In 1755 Daniel himself would be buried next to Ruth in the Kennett Friends churchyard. In February of that year, in Salisbury Township of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, he had made his will, appointing his two oldest sons, John and Daniel, sole executors of his estate. The two had most likely already received the land in Salisbury from
their aged father. Daniel's affection for his other loved ones is also evident. As if to perpetuate his memory for at least two generations, he left his bed and bedcloth to Ruth Carter, his only grandchild. In addition to equal distribution of his books and the division of the remainder of his personal estate among his children, Daniel also left instructions for his lots in Wilmington to be sold and the money given to the youngest three: William, Stephen, and Ann. [20]

Although his father had given him some financial assistance, Stephen would have difficulty making a living where his father had. Economic conditions had changed in Chester and Lancaster counties: in the 1730s land had been cheap at less than one pound per acre, but by the time Stephen would have been starting a family in the 1760s, land prices had risen to as much as three pounds per acre. [21] Increased commercialization had forced the price of land too high for most farmers; subsequently, many had become tenants. Faced with this unwelcome prospect, Stephen decided that he could better care for his family in Virginia where he could buy his own land for less money.

Stephen became one of the many Americans who participated in a great migration with the expectation of being better able to care for his family in an area of increased economic opportunity. They closely resembled many other migrant families: Stephen and Ann were young,
their family was small, [22] and they belonged to the lower middle class, the group most likely to move. While the very poor may have wished for greater opportunity, they often did not own the wagon, horses, farm equipment and money that such a move required. [23]

Leaving their home in Lancaster County in 1764, Stephen, Ann, and their five young sons followed the old Indian path that had become the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road to Loudon County, Virginia, in the northeastern Shenandoah Valley. Once they arrived, Stephen purchased a tract of land consisting most likely of a few cleared acres, a meadow, some fruit trees, several acres of woods where their stock could graze and the family could cut trees for fuel, and a one-story log farmhouse. Here the family settled into the roles and tasks they had performed before the move. [24]

Stephen's main responsibility was providing for his family. He had learned farming from his father, yet there is some indication that he was skeptical about its reliability after his rough experience in Pennsylvania. To ensure his family's future, Stephen learned the blacksmithing trade to supplement his farm income. His hard work was financially rewarded, for by 1773, he was able to purchase an additional 285 acres of farmland. [25] It would seem that Stephen had made the right decision in moving to Virginia.
Yet the lives of Stephen and his family, like those of everyone around them, were soon affected by the chaos of the American Revolution. As the British and American troops moved through northeastern Virginia, the people in the area were fearful, for epidemic diseases, occasional rapes, confiscation of food, and the destruction of property often followed in the troops' wake. [26] Even if the soldiers did not march through the rural community where Stephen and his family lived, they would nonetheless have been unable to escape from this climate of anxiety.

Stephen's political and religious stances during the war are difficult to determine. He was certainly not a Loyalist, for his property was not seized. Yet his age and lack of military records suggest that he did not serve in the Continental Army. Adhering to a basic tenet of their faith, most Quakers were pacifists, but Stephen was not a recorded member of any of the Virginia monthly meetings, perhaps indicating that he was not active in the faith that his father and mother had so carefully tried to develop in him.

Unlike several of her female contemporaries, Ann's sphere of responsibilities during the war probably did not extend outside the home. Her husband's presence on the farm did not force her to run it on her own, engage in business transactions, or make all the family's decisions. Her life was still difficult, however. The fear of war was no greater than the very personal and unsuppressable
anxiety that she experienced during the pregnancies, deliveries and early childhoods of the four children she bore after the move to Virginia. [27] Even during the war she had to care for the children, her husband, and the household in addition to helping with the farm harvests and chores.

Despite this unending exertion and an extended illness in 1790, Ann outlived Stephen. As was customary, he left her his personal belongings and one-third of his property in his 1799 will. His youngest son James was appointed executor and given all the land, although it could not be sold during Ann's lifetime. The other eight children were each given a token amount of ten shillings. [28]

It is likely that James was given the properties because all the other sons had left the county. At least one had migrated to Kentucky, and Daniel had moved farther west to Bedford County, Virginia. It was becoming increasingly difficult for small farmers to earn a living in Loudon County. As northern Virginia became more attractive to large plantation owners, land prices had risen to as high as five pounds per acre in some areas. [29] The small farmers who worked the land themselves or hired a few laborers could not compete with the powerful slaveholders in the expanding commercialized economy.

Daniel eventually joined the Society of Friends and participated in a westward Quaker migration out of the
Shenandoah Valley to Grayson County, Virginia, in 1803. Several factors may have prompted Daniel to convert to the faith that his father had apparently rejected: a need for security during the Revolution, the influence of his first wife who was raised a Quaker, and, perhaps most historically significant, a sympathy with the Quakers' opposition to slavery.

Led by John Woolman in the 1750s, many Friends began to verbalize their belief that slavery contradicted two of their basic doctrines: the unity of all people, and the presence of the the Light in everyone. Subjugating blacks to live in humiliation and degradation directly opposed God's ordination of human equality. On a less ideological level, the characteristically industrious Quakers also judged that the institution of slavery encouraged laziness among the slaveowners and their children. The Friends' future in the South appeared bleak for those who felt that slavery would corrupt the large society and perhaps even the church and their families. [30] To these Quakers, the Northwest Territory became more appealing.

When Daniel and his wife Mary moved their family from Grayson County, Virginia, to Highland County, Ohio, in 1814, he was in his late fifties with ten children to support. He had already twice moved within western Virginia, finally settling in Grayson County with the intention of raising his family and farming his land
there [31]. Obviously, more than a desire for economic advancement motivated this old and financially stable man to move to the Northwest Territory.

Coupled with Daniel's desire to shelter his family from a society that condoned slavery was perhaps a wish to move them, at least temporarily, from the ever encroaching negative effects of the market economy: "The impetus may have come from the desire to preserve traditional ways of doing things in the face of massive economic change." [32] The disregard for human life explicit in slavery and the self-interest of the market capitalists perhaps indicated to the conservative Daniel that moving his family West was the sole option he had for maintaining the family's solidarity and virtue.

Approaching the decline of his life, Daniel wanted to impress upon his children two important convictions that had been both his father's and grandfather's: the importance of family, and, most clearly in the case of his grandfather, religion as a guiding principle.

When Daniel moved his family to Highland County, they were "participants in one of the largest and fastest population shifts in the history of the world." [33] Entire Virginian Quaker communities were packing up and moving to southern Ohio.

Daniel knew many of the families in Highland County because they had been his neighbors in Virginia. Among them was the family of John Carey. The spiritual,
friendship and familial ties between the Careys and the McPhersons were strong. Both families had attended the Mount Pleasant Monthly Meeting in Virginia before moving their certificates to the Fairfield Monthly Meeting in Ohio. Such a communal religious spirit encouraged a deep friendship between the families. It was not then surprising when John's son married Anna McPherson, one of Daniel's daughters, in 1808. And in Ohio, John's daughter Ruth eventually married Joseph, one of Daniel's sons. While such relationships between families may initially appear inconsequential, this one illustrates the tendency for southern communities to move and then settle together in the new territory.

When John Carey moved his family to Ohio in 1816, Ruth was ten years old. Although she was only a child, she had her responsibility during the move: driving the family's two cows. [34] While she may have dreamed along the way of the adventure of life in a new land, she would find that it was difficult being a pioneer girl.

Near the town of Hillsboro, the Carey family built a cabin and began clearing a parcel of land for farming. Ruth and her sisters may have been expected to help with the outside work, although there were many domestic chores to be done around the cabin. Like others of the period, it was probably crude: split log walls, a dirt floor, stone fireplace, homemade furniture, and paper windows "made more translucent with oil or lard." [35] In
addition to helping take care of the household and the younger children, Ruth was expected to spin wool and flax for the family's clothing.

Ruth would remain in this household until the age of twenty-five, when she married Joseph. The two had been lifelong acquaintances, but to convince her to marry him, Joseph probably tried to impress Ruth by his hard work and determination, for "to labor was commendable in those days, and if boys or men were idle they were called lazy and trifling." [36]

A similar sense of determination led Joseph to move Ruth to Clinton County, Ohio, in 1833, after they had been married for only a year. Clinton County was adjacent to Highland County, but the fact that they moved twice within Clinton County during their first year there suggests that Joseph either was scouting the area for a desirable place to live or did not initially have the money to buy a parcel of land. Eventually Joseph did acquire property and settled down, for he and Ruth remained there nine years and began raising their two children.

In 1842, Ruth would move again with Joseph, this time to Indiana. It was in this state that she would suffer her greatest loss: Joseph's death. They had worked the land in Grant County, Indiana, for ten years, had seen their son married in the local Oak Ridge Friends' Meetinghouse, were enjoying their young grandchildren, and were perhaps looking forward to spending the rest of their
lives there when Joseph unexpectedly died at the age of fifty-four.

While Ruth's church family was undoubtedly supportive after her husband's death, it would take Ruth's courage and determination to provide for herself and her fourteen-year-old daughter, Mary Margaret. Ruth apparently tried to run the farm or perhaps pay Joseph's debts, for she remained in the area for two years before following her son Daniel, also recently widowed, back to old friends and family in Clinton County, Ohio.

Since Joseph had left her little if any financial support, it was not surprising when Ruth remarried in 1868. However, her new husband, Zadok Morris, was not Quaker, and Ruth's marrying out of the union resulted in her condemnation from the Society. After this date, her name disappears from the Quaker records.

While Ruth was condemned and did not reapply for membership after Zadok's death, she still adhered to the religious principles she had instilled in her children. Raising her children in the faith had not been enough, for even in her old age Ruth was an active member of the Women's Christian Temperance Movement. A large number of Midwestern women had joined the organization in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, using it as "a base for their participation in reformist causes, as a sophisticated avenue for political action, as a support for demanding the ballot, and as a vehicle for supporting
a wide range of charitable activities" [37] Although Ruth undoubtedly enjoyed Christian companionship, she was most likely persuaded to join the movement by her daughter-in-law, a cousin of Eliza Jane Thompson, one of the leaders of the Crusade. [38]

At the age of one hundred, Ruth was honored at the 1906 WCTU Iowa state convention, where "she was made a life member, which probably makes her the oldest member in the world wearing the little White Ribbon bow [symbolic of the movement]." [39] She lived to be 102.

Ruth's son Daniel exhibited a similar zeal for a Christian cause. He became a Quaker minister, evidence that she had successfully instructed him in the Quaker faith. An extraordinary individual, Daniel can be considered the apex of the five-generation McPherson tradition of devotion to the family, geographic mobility, and obedience to religious guidance.

To be a nineteenth-century Quaker minister required no formal religious training or education, although some were "recorded" as accepted ministers to the Society. [40] Unlike the nonsectarian protestant denominations, the Quaker ministers were not given authority over the organization of a particular meeting; in a sense, they were "circuit-riding preachers."

Dedicating his life to evangelical service when he was twenty years old, Daniel would often leave his wife and children to ride the hundreds of miles on horseback to
minister at meetings in New England, the South, and the Midwest. His frequent and often extended absences from his family could be thought to suggest a callous attitude toward his responsibility as a husband and father, but Daniel undoubtedly felt that he was following God's will and was taking care of the larger church "family."

Daniel, along with several other contemporary Quakers, felt that the Quaker family needed reviving, and he became a noted minister of the Revivalist movement in Iowa and Minnesota during the 1870s. [41]

The Quaker revival movement was inspired by earlier awakenings in other denominations. Friends throughout the Midwest had begun attending other protestant revivals, most notably those of the Methodists. Consequently, some Friends started to question the effectiveness of the silent and introspective Quaker worship. Some wanted to enliven the Society by introducing hymns into worship, broadening the ministry, and increasing speaking in the meetings. [42] Even the Society's devotion to holiness as a prerequisite for salvation came under the attack of its more radical members. The revivalists' preaching of instantaneous and individual salvation was condemned by the more conservative reformers, such as Joel Bean, who still believed that salvation was "a work not completed by one instantaneous act of faith, but a work begun, a work progressing, a work increasing through the refinements of spiritual baptisms and the progress of heavenly
discipline."

In addition to their desire to reform the traditional Quaker worship and their acceptance of "born again" religious conversions, the revivalists "attacked . . . the plain life, and elders, while encouraging congregational singing, mourners' benches, and a form of worship centering on a single minister." [44]

The late nineteenth-century revival movement would eventually result in a split in American Quakerism between those who tried to update Quakerism while still preserving its separateness, and those revivalists who viewed Quakerism as only one of the faiths "in the great holiness soul-saving apparatus." [45]

Daniel was in the midst of this historic revivalist controversy. He eventually came under the personal attack of Joel Bean after he questioned the religious credibility of Bean's brother and called for his condemnation. [46]

But Daniel's devotion to the revivalist mission did not wane; he preached at Iowa meetings, attended the Iowa Yearly Meetings, and established churches in Minnesota before his retirement to Des Moines, Iowa, in 1894. [47]

There he remained in the company of family and friends until his death in 1913.

Daniel was distinctly different from the four generations of McPhersons that preceded him because his frequent moves were not motivated by economics or a desire to escape from the South. He had left the family's traditional farming occupation to cultivate instead a crop
of revived Quakers. Although religion guided his life more than it had in the previous generations, without his Quaker family heritage, he would probably not have been so zealous.

The five generations succeeding Daniel would respect his dedication to God's work, but they would again be guided to move more by economics and family survival. Their quest for new beginnings even further West would prompt their covered-wagon journeys to Kansas, the foothills of the Colorado Rocky Mountains, and, finally, to the lonely farming frontier of the Western Slope in Garfield County. Although the seventh-generation McPherson who moved to Garfield County converted to the Baptist faith, he and his successors retained two traditions of Quakerism: the strong sense of communal obligation, and a commitment to the institution of the family.

The McPhersons remained in Garfield County, for by the second decade of the twentieth century, the option of moving to a new American frontier had vanished. But the idealism that made this family and others like them move West is still apparent. The frontier and its promise of economic opportunity and family security has given way to a desire to succeed in areas untried by the colonial and the nineteenth-century McPhersons, namely, higher education, corporate farming, and small-business ownership. While the nature of the work has changed, the
McPhersons have not. They will undoubtedly continue to work hard and instill in their children a spiritual and familial appreciation of who they are.
Notes


3. Ibid., p. 307.

4. Although Daniel was only one of such abduction cases, his story gained some notoriety among later Scotch immigrants. John McPherson relates how one woman living near Cross-creeks (now Fayetteville), North Carolina, asked Daniel's grandson Joseph, "Was it your father or grandfathery who was the kidnapped bye?" Joseph did not know whether she heard the story before leaving Scotland or from some of Daniel's descendants who had settled in North Carolina.


7. Ibid.


11. Edworthy.

12. Lemon, p. 27.

13. Ibid., p. 28.


16. Ibid., p. 5.


18. Ibid., p. 196.

19. Although Ruth did not die in childbirth, there is a possibility that the physical stress of bearing and raising children in rural colonial America diminished her life expectancy. Unlike the well-to-do urban women who could afford to hire household help as they recuperated after childbirth (Norton 83), Ruth probably could not. Perhaps her only assistance came from her oldest child Ann, who ranged from the age of four to eighteen during Ruth's succeeding pregnancies and deliveries.

20. Daniel McPherson, will, Salisbury Township of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 5 August 1755. Daniel had a sixth child, Othniel, who was struck by lightning at the age of twelve (John McPherson).

22. According to Gragg, the average number of children in a migrating family during the 1760s was 4.26.


28. Stephen McPherson, will, Loudon County, Virginia, 14 October 1799.


31. Daniel had moved to Bedford County, Virginia, in 1793 before moving to Grayson County in 1803.


36. Ibid., p. 273.


39. Ibid.

40. For example, see Winneshiek Monthly Meeting minutes, 11 December 1874, where Daniel is mentioned as a recorded minister of the gospel.


43. Joel Bean, letter, Christian Worker, 1 January 1875, p. 67.

44. Hamm, "Joel Bean," p. 41.


46. Joel Bean, letter discussing his quarrel with Daniel, Quaker Collection, Earlham College.

47. William Wade Hinshaw, Index to Iowa Quaker Meeting Records, Orthodox Record 8, p. 301. See also vol. 7, Iowa, and vol. 8., p. 245. See also a photograph of
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