

# Scott County Historic Preservation Society, Inc.



*Photo courtesy of Putnam Museum*

## ***April 8, 2010 SCHPS Meeting 6:30 P.M.- 1533 Clay Street, Davenport, Iowa Tour of Clifton Mansion (Members only, please)***

### ***House For Sale: History Turns A Page***

If you had to count the grandest mansions in Davenport on one hand, J. M. D. Burrows' 1852 "Clifton" would surely rocket to the top of that select list of "Who's Who" on the frontier. With its soaring two story Corinthian columns (Burrows carved the column capitals himself, out of necessity), mammoth Greek Revival pediment jutting up off the edge of the bluff--and its \$160,000 price tag, this imposing edifice must have looked more jaw-dropping western White House than frontier merchant's residence to steamboat passengers chugging up river in the valley far below. A veritable apparition on the prairies in a day when the Morning Democrat newspaper was still printing stories about roving bands of renegade "beggar" Indians, residing in the bulrushes at the edge of the city limits.

Burrow's palatial frontier mansion was as resplendent inside as out. It featured floor-to-ceiling windows fashioned from hand poured small paned glass, entry doors with elegant bevel glass panes, ornate brass ceiling gaseliers suspended from 12 ft. high embellished plaster ceilings, nine marble and faux painted fireplaces and a grand three story elliptical mahogany staircase leading to the third story belvedere tower on the roof. Formal gardens and orchards extended from 12<sup>th</sup> Street to Telegraph Road.

Davenport's self-made merchant prince did not always lead a life of such luxury. His first 1838 home was little more than a board shack to hold his land claim. Burrows stumbled upon a veritable pot of gold in his own backyard when he dug a kitchen garden. It produced such a bountiful harvest of fruits and vegetables that neighbors began clamoring to purchase his excess production. Burrows soon realized that tilling the soil on a bare dirt land grant claim was not nearly as lucrative as becoming the chain of supply to a never ending procession of wagon trains rolling west across the Black Hawk Purchase and beyond. Fresh produce proved to be far more valuable than a gold mine on the frontier.

Since the town of Chicago did not even exist at the time Davenport was a boom town, and St. Paul was still only a woodlot with one log cabin, Burrows had to think creatively to expand his distribution territory beyond the few isolated local settlements. He began by selling to traders, then "traded bacon, flour and beans with the Indians, in exchange for feathers and beeswax," which he sold for top dollar "in Cincinnati." He marshaled an army of Scott County farmers and pork producers to help him meet the demands of his regional enterprise. Burrows soon captured the fresh produce and pork market for every settlement from St. Louis to St. Paul. Impressed with Burrow's business acumen, the U.S. Government soon after awarded him a contract to supply all of the fresh produce, pork, soap, candles and supplies need to outfit all of the soldiers billeted at Fort Snelling, in St. Paul.

### **April 2010 Newsletter**

**Next SCHPS Meeting,  
April, 8<sup>th</sup> 6:30pm**

1533 Clay Street,  
Davenport, Iowa  
Tour of Clifton Hill  
Mansion

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Burrows' pockets literally began to fill with gold—as fast as his journal filled with tales of the harrowing encounters he survived while trying to carve out a merchant empire in the middle of a wilderness. In Burrows' narrative, *The Early Day of Rock Island and Davenport*, he vividly recounts his death-defying trip back to Davenport after collecting a large commission from a fur trade company at Prairie du Chien---long before the days of banks, legal state paper currency, electronic check transfers, Brinks armored trucks, much less even the hint of a local lawman. He had little choice but to fill his pockets with as much Spanish gold as he could comfortably walk away from Fort Snelling with. He then foolishly attempted to cross a swollen river in what soon became a run away canoe. After barely surviving his first river crossing, he was soon tested again when he had to resort to pole-vaulting across a wide creek—where he lost one of his sagging torn gold-filled coat pockets in the swirling water. After successfully fishing his gold coins out of the muddy creek bottom, he resumed his solitary journey toward home, alone, on foot, in the dark, on a cold November night in a driving rain. He walked 75 miles in 36 hours, from Prairie du Chien to the nearest available shelter at the Dubuque stage coach stop. Years later, he mused that he awoke the next morning so stiff and sore that he could barely walk. He had to slide down the boarding house's banister just to make it to the Davenport stage on time!

As the Territory grew, Burrows became the millionaire king of the largest wheat milling operation in the state of Iowa. Burrows & Prettyman's "Abion Flour" commanded the highest price of any flour found on the eastern grocery store shelves of New York City. To the west, thousands of barrels of flour were sold to every wagon train leaving Davenport and heading across the Great Plains. Tragically, in 1857, the national wheat futures markets collapsed overnight. It caused a national financial panic worse than the great Crash of 1929. Cook & Sargent's Bank failed and J. M. D. Burrows lost a million dollars overnight. He was ruined. His beloved "Clifton" was sold to honorably settle debts, rather than ask for extensions or fail faithful business partners.

Soon after, George L. Davenport purchased the house. (Son of Col. Davenport) Family members lived in the mansion until just past the turn-of-the-century, when the house was sold to Jonathan Winter. John had grown up playing in the orchards surrounding the grand old mansion. As a boy, he vowed to return it to its glory some day. Years later, John became an architect and made good on his childhood vow by purchasing "Clifton" for \$40,000 on Nov. 1, 1904. Nationally famous novelist, Alice French, was so taken with John's resurrection of the stately old mansion that she used it as the setting for her internationally acclaimed book, *Man of the Hour*, in 1905.

John's daughter, Wilma, continued to live in "Clifton" for decades after his death. In 1992, Wilma finally passed the torch and entrusted "Clifton's" care to long time SCHPS members, George and Barbara Norman. Now, almost two decades later, the Normans are retiring. They have begun the search for the next generation of preservation minded stewards of history who will care for this priceless piece of Davenport frontier architecture. The page is turning. Join SCHPS' April 8th tour of "Clifton" and help us find that special person. Who knows, one look and it might just be YOU!

*Karen R. Anderson*

### **Helping Hands Needed--April 24th & 25th!!!!**

**Sat., April 24th, 10-12 A.M.—Bring a vac and feather duster to help prep the**

LeClaire House on Saturday morning, before Sunday's big trolley tours. Volunteers will be treated to a delectable *free* noon luncheon--prepared by Chef David Pai.

**Sun., April 25th, 12-5 P.M.—Tour guides and volunteers needed** at the LeClaire House during Sunday's

First Presbyterian Church Centennial trolley tour. To volunteer, call Karen Anderson at 563-324-0257

### **Save the date-Sept. 19- SCHPS Historic Homes Tour, 12-5 P.M.**

Tour Houses: Antoine LeClaire House, David Leo's Dr. Egbert Storrs Barrows Mansion, Joe Sang's Renwick Mansion, Ed & Sandy Winborn's Village B & B, Tim Huey & Sandy Doran's Charles Stein House.

Tour guides and volunteers needed for this mega event. Call-Duane Timm to volunteer at Ph. 563-323-4077

### **Join Scott County Historic Preservation Society today--or Give A Gift Membership!**

10 informative monthly newsletters each year, plus regional calendar of events; private historic tours, lectures and special events. Only 15.00 per household, per year, for e-mailed newsletters, or \$20.00 per year for U.S. mail delivery. Mail checks to SCHPS, Box 5017, Bettendorf, Iowa 52722, or pay at door.

### **SCHPS Monthly Calendar of Events:**

April 1-30th- Buffalo Bill Museum, LeClaire, Ia.: 80 historic Mississippi River photos, Galena to Burlington.

April 10th & May 10th-German American Heritage Center: "Amana Colonies: The Move to City Life."

April 10th, 17 & 24th-Brucemore, Cedar Rapids: "View From Back Stairs," perspective of Domestic servants.

April 11th-German Amer. Heritage Center: Giles Weigandt, "What Your Handwriting Reveals About You"

May 3rd-German American Heritage Center: Day trip to Kalona, Iowa. Reservations-322-8844 by April 28th.

May 29th-- 9:30-11 A.M.-Founder's Day-Memorial Day celebration at Davenport's City Cemetery-

Live music, guest speakers, Honor & Color guards. Come view restoration efforts.

July 10th, -10-4 P.M.—"Gold Coast Blooms, A Garden Tour"-- Gardens, garden workshops, concert in the park, vendors. Sponsored by Gold Coast & Hamburg Historic District Assoc.

For details go to-- [www.davenportgoldcoast.com](http://www.davenportgoldcoast.com). (Rain date, Sunday-July 11<sup>th</sup>)

### **Just for fun visit---www.preservation.org to view info. on:**

Preservation at its best; Iowa Historic Tax Credit programs; Iowa's most endangered sites, Iowa Downtown Summit (Davenport, August), Iowa County School Conference (Marquette, October), Barn Initiatives, etc.