The Palimpsest

JUNE 1928

CONTENTS

Nicholas Feiervary 189
MARIE E. MEYER

On the Frontier in 1845 199

Bowen's Prairie 202
THEODORE F. KOOP

Comment 219
THE EDITOR

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH
Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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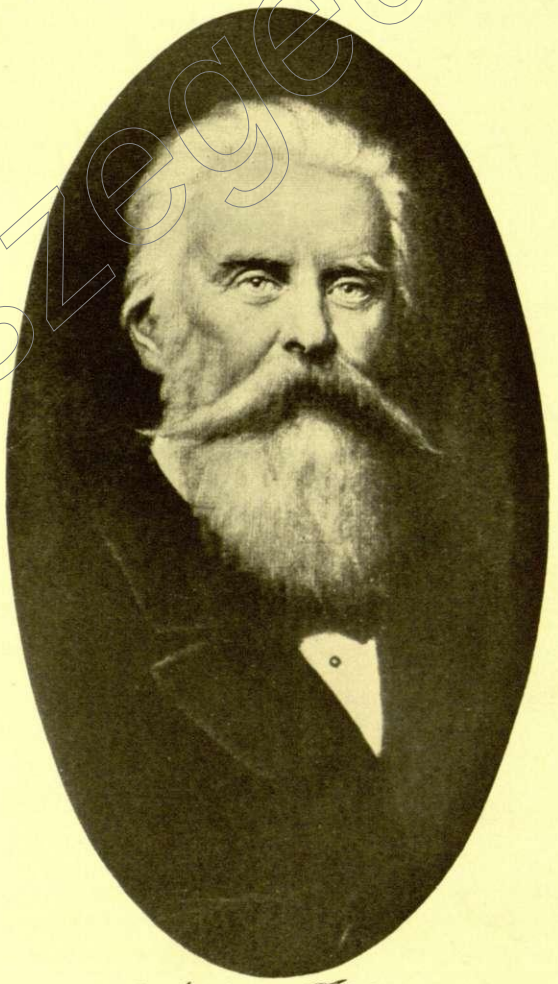

Nicholas Tejérvary

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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Nicholas Fejervary

In the northwest part of Davenport, high on the bluffs overlooking the city and the river beyond, is situated the large and beautiful Fejérváry Park. Magnificent vistas of flowers and distant landscape appear at every turn of the winding drives, while the zoo with its herd of bison is a perennial attraction. Near the center of the park a stately brick mansion with imposing verandas, surrounded by spacious lawns, graces a slight eminence. About the place there is an air of the elegance and distinction of other days. Obviously it was once a home of wealth and refinement. If a stranger should ask who had once lived there, he would be told that it was the residence of Nicholas Fejérváry, a Hungarian nobleman, who had come to Davenport in 1852. The park which bears his name and includes his former home, which was given to the city by his daughter in 1902, is a lasting memorial to one of the

most picturesque and benevolent citizens of Davenport.

The period of political unrest in Europe between the years of 1840 and 1850 may have been fortunate for the United States, for it was during that decade that many men of distinction and ability left their native land. These patriots in the cause of popular government, who rose in their distress against their oppressors, turned to America as a country of their own ideals. Very soon after Iowa became a State these immigrants pushed westward and joined the American settlers in the pioneer movement. Liberty-loving themselves, they preferred homes on free soil, and the rich agricultural possibilities of Iowa offered many opportunities in farming and business. Among them came Nicholas Fejérváry.

Courtly, dignified, a gentleman of the old school of European courtesy, spare of build and of medium height, his distinguished appearance accentuated by a flowing mustache and generous beard, he moved quietly and unassumingly in the life of the growing city where he is still remembered and admired. Of those who have been prominent in the history of Davenport, the figure of this Hungarian cavalier is conspicuously colorful.

Nicholas Fejérváry, a descendant of an old and distinguished line of Hungarian landowners and patriots, was born on May 27, 1811, in Pest, now united with Buda across the Danube to form Budapest, the capital of Hungary. Carefully schooled in

Latin, then the legal language of his country, and in French by a veteran of the Napoleonic wars, the boy rapidly developed an aptitude for languages which later enabled him to become an accomplished linguist. Although he spoke German, the language of his country's conquerors, he steadfastly refused to learn to write it.

His youth was typical of the boy of aristocratic parentage on a large European estate seventy-five years ago. In his contact with the peasants, he came to understand their problems and their viewpoint, while his normal life in the open developed an interest in the soil which remained with him always.

Upon his graduation from the legal department of the University of Pest, like most cultured Hungarians he took an active part in politics. At this time unrest against the high-handed and arbitrary rule of Austria was prevalent throughout Hungary. The suppression of newspapers, the elaborate spy system, the curtailment of privileges, and the disbanding of public meetings only served to kindle the already smoldering fires of patriotism among the Hungarians. Naturally the young statesman studied and discussed the sad plight of his country. Unusually well-read, interested in political reform and its progress in foreign countries, keenly discerning in public affairs, endowed with sound judgment, and displaying an unfaltering devotion to his country, Mr. Fejérváry was regarded by revolutionary leaders as one of the foremost patriots of the day.

During this period of political activity he married Karolina Karasz de Horgos, a lady of refinement and culture, and retired from public life to his country estate in 1845. The years that followed were probably the richest and happiest of his European experience. Although the dread disease of cholera claimed some of his intimate household and the cloud of revolution hung on the horizon, it was a period of peace and fulfillment for him. Two children were born, Nicholas and Celestine.

In 1847 the long-expected and hoped-for revolution occurred. Although Nicholas Fejérváry had no active part in the conflict, he was in many ways closely allied with the cause. When the stroke for freedom failed and martial law was established throughout the land, after many of his friends had been executed or exiled and their lands confiscated, Mr. Fejérváry at last decided to leave Hungary and its unhappy reminders of former days. So, after a year's sojourn in Belgium, he set sail for the United States with his family in May, 1852, hoping to forget the misfortunes of oppression and revolution.

The problem of choosing a home in the new world was a grave one and Mr. Fejérváry studied it with his usual care and foresight. Deciding against the commercial East and the slave South he determined to make a journey to the West and see for himself the opportunities which awaited the settler. Thus he came to realize the vastness of the country and its unlimited resources, he witnessed a "mighty empire moving west", yet he sensed its hardships, its crude life barren of the associations of his former interests, and the privations of those who cast their lot in a new country. Feeling that Mrs. Fejérváry's health was too delicate to undergo the journey westward and the life there he returned to New York discouraged and in doubt. But it was Mrs. Fejérváry who decided that the new home should be in the West, for, understanding woman that she was, she saw that beneath her husband's doubt and concern for her health was an eagerness to be a part of this rich country in the making. Afterward she mirthfully records "that the thing which gave her real inconvenience was not having a maid to do her hair."

Coming to Davenport by way of Erie, Cleveland, and Chicago, (and rumor has it that he carried a gripsack full of gold), Mr. Fejérváry purchased a tract of land on the bluffs of the city, now part of Fejérváry Park. There he proceeded to plan and erect an imposing house of red brick, combining in architecture and setting much of the old-world atmosphere and charm. As was his usual custom, every decision, every detail, had his careful consideration. He personally superintended the construction of the house and the development of the grounds. Most of the brick for the house were made on the spot with machinery brought from New York for the purpose. Once, on a hot summer day when the foreman was overcome by sunstroke, Mr.

Fejérváry put on a smock and served the machine expertly himself.

Upon completion the house and grounds formed a pleasing example of a fine estate. The beauty of the site and the commanding view it afforded made the Fejérváry residence at once one of the show places of Davenport. With the vineyards and orchards, delightful arbors and running brooks it suggested the age-old security and contentment that is the heritage of wealth and culture. Quite naturally the spacious home of such a hospitable owner and his gracious wife became a place of meeting and refuge for many an exiled Hungarian, and no one was turned away without aid and advice from their more fortunate countryman.

Mr. Fejérváry possessed shrewd business ability. By far-sighted investments in real estate, particularly in the business district of Davenport, he considerably increased his wealth. He did not dispose of his Hungarian estates, however, and after his death his daughter returned to live there. Scrupulously honest in all business affairs, his word was held to be as good as his bond. One Davenport historian records that "in the pioneer west interest was two per cent per month or twenty-five per cent per year. He, however, never took more than the lawful ten per cent. He believed in the honesty of men and was never rash in adverse judgment; if he caught any one in dishonesty, that person need never approach him again."

Mr. Fejérváry was accustomed to attend to his business affairs in person, depending upon no one else to collect the rent or oversee repairs and improvements. Some Davenport citizens recall very ceremonious calls of a landlord who acknowledged their greetings with a short military bow and a broad sweep of the hat. No woman entered his office that he did not rise and remain standing until she was seated.

When the family first settled in Davenport the schools were not deemed to be suitable for the two children, so Mrs. Fejérváry, who had been educated by a pupil of Johann Pestalozzi, assumed the responsibility for their education, with the able assistance of her husband. The library in the Fejérváry home was uncommonly extensive and it must have been a delightful place for the children. When Nicholas was fifteen he entered Griswold College in Davenport. The war cut short his academic career, however, for he enlisted at the age of seventeen and was killed soon afterward. His tragic fate was a terrible blow to his father, and although Mr. Fejérváry made a brave attempt to carry on for his wife and daughter much of the joy in life passed with the death of the boy who held all the promise of splendid manhood.

In May, 1859, the Davenport *Democrat* carried this news item: "Louis Kossuth, the Hungarian patriot, writes to Nikolas Fejervary to return to Hungary and aid in the struggle for liberty". But

Mr. Fejérváry did not respond to the plea of his famous countryman. Possibly he realized that the time was not at hand for the winning of independence.

During the Civil War he was an ardent supporter of the Union, for he realized clearly that the tremendous struggle within the United States involved universal principles. Afterward he was a moving spirit in raising funds for the Civil War monument erected on Main Street as a tribute to those who died in the cause of freedom.

In politics Mr. Fejérváry did not definitely ally himself with any party — although he probably voted most frequently with the Republicans. He supported Horace Greeley in 1872 and later became an enthusiastic admirer of Grover Cleveland. A large portrait of President Cleveland hung in the library and Mr. Fejérváry often referred to him in conversations.

Although reared in the Catholic faith, Mr. Fejérváry had no intercourse with the church for many years. His religious views were strongly inclined toward the tenets of freethinking: certainly he was a firm advocate of toleration. While his friends were always welcome in his house, Sunday was the day he particularly enjoyed company. Once he remarked to a chance caller, "My daughter is at church. I don't go to church. Come here whenever you wish."

Worthy causes found him always ready to give of

his time and money, and the many charitable activities of his wife and daughter received his earnest support. Little kindnesses, such as sending Hungarian newspapers and magazines to his less fortunate countrymen and the saving of foreign stamps for youthful collectors, served to endear him to a wide circle of friends.

During his later years, Mr. Fejérváry was not active in public affairs — he never held a public office. He was for a long time, however, a member of the governing board of the Cook Home for Aged Women. Perhaps it was from that service that he learned the blessings of such an institution, for early in the nineties he determined to endow a similar home for aged men. Acquiring five acres of land (now well within the city), he proceeded to erect a suitable building and provide sufficient financial support for its proper maintenance. The Fejérváry Home was opened in 1893, but a peculiar clause in the qualifications for admission prevented many worthy aged men from sharing its benefits. According to the original plan only those men who had farmed twenty years in Scott County and were American born could be housed there. How few men who have farmed twenty years in Scott County are in need of such a home! In 1907, with the consent of his daughter, this provision was set aside.

The death of Mr. Fejérváry on September 19, 1895, marked the passing of one of the most picturesque and public spirited citizens Davenport has

ever known. Coming to Iowa, not as an exile or a fugitive but as an immigrant, he gave without stint the best that he had to his adopted country. A gentleman in the true sense of the word, and a scholar, the name of Nicholas Fejérváry remains the symbol of a man who gave more to life than he accepted from it.

MARIE E. MEYER