

Ashlea Lawrence

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A Forgotten Man's, Forgotten Creek

On January 21, 1839, along with John Ronalds and Chauncey Swan, Robert Ralston was appointed by ballot to be one of the commissioners on the committee that chose the site of the state capitol.¹ The meetings were to be held in Burlington, Iowa, as it was also the meeting place for the first Iowa Territorial Legislature, and it was the responsibility of these three men to choose, plan, finance, budget, and construct the new state's capitol. Swan himself was in charge of supervising the construction of the building itself, while the other two completed basically all other responsibilities. Before Iowa was even a state yet, Iowa City was chosen to become the capitol on May 4, 1839. On August 18, 1839, later that year, there was an auction of lots to raise money for the construction of the capitol building. The government gave the new capitol a square mile of Indian lands for the capitol square. The "left bank" of the Iowa River (East) was chosen because that's the side that settlers arrived from so they would see the capitol first off when they came into the city. Iowa City was a picturesque city built upon grassy hills. And in the middle of that city ran a troublesome creek. A creek that flooded and flooded often, disrupting the lives and businesses of Iowa City. A creek soon to be named after Robert Ralston with a fascinating history that begs to be told to generations living next to it for years to come.²

¹ *Historical Stories About Iowa City*. By Irving Weber. Volume 5, page 178

² *Historical Stories About Iowa City*. By Irving Weber. Volume 6, page 206

It is recorded that Robert Ralston was probably born around 1797-1807 in Burlington, IA. His wife's name was Harriet Ralston and she was from Wellsville, Ohio. Their relationship has little to no documentation, but it seems that they had at least two sons. Their names were Andrew Jackson Ralston and Thomas Herford Ralston. There is also mention of a nephew of Ralston's named Robert Gribben, as well as the name of Gribben's son's wife's niece Ms. Florence Selby. Because of Ralston's relatively unknown historical background, there is little published about the man's family as well as simply about himself. In fact, according to Selby in a letter written by her, all the letters and writings by Robert Ralston were burned up in the San Francisco earthquake in 1906. It seems that his son had moved them with him to his office when he moved there to pursue undisclosed business ventures. None of the documents survived the fire.³

Nevertheless, there is still enough attainable information to understand Ralston's importance in shaping today's Iowa City and yesterday's state capitol. As a committee member, legend has it that Ralston was a bit troublesome. He was often very late for meetings which caused great lapses in progress of the state capitol's building. The other fellow committee members quickly grew tired of Ralston's ways and it seems that their relationship with him was a bit sour. It seems that it is because of this that Ralston Creek was named after Ralston. The members of the committee named the ever-flooding and bothersome creek after the ever-bothersome committee member who could never seem to be on time. They had as low of opinions of Robert Ralston as they did the muddy, polluted creek that run through the town and disrupted their business. "A lousy creek named after a lousy man."⁴

³Research files generated by Jacob A. Swisher on Robert Ralston. These letters were written in typewriting between the years of 1933-1941.

⁴*Historical Stories About Iowa City*. By Irving Weber. Volume 6, page 130

Perhaps the creek itself is an insight into further understanding this un-punctual man. The creek runs through Iowa City as an effect of farm and industrialization run-off. It is reasonably polluted and drains into the toxically polluted and undrinkable Iowa River. At the peak of the industrial boom in America, a couple of fairly significant railroads ran past it as well as through the hills that Iowa City was built on since it is 642 feet above sea level. During Ralston's time with the creek, on Iowa Avenue on the second block just before the Lucas St. intersection, there was a narrow bridge over Ralston Creek. It was the only one. By 1962, there would be 35 bridges over Ralston Creek, the first one being constructed in April of 1850.

The creek that had so much history in Iowa City surely showed no mercy in the spring floods. It would flood so often and so severely, homes and businesses would need to continue to be rebuilt and repaired almost annually. It seems that the creek would become forgotten about or ignored until it flooded and forced those living around it to recognize that it was still there and still a part of the city. There are several accounts of contact with the creek including some by Irving Weber, as well as other Iowa City residents including this one from 1904:

“There was a January thaw and Ralston Creek was on one of its worst rampages. Iowa Avenue was completely under water with large chunks of ice floating down the middle of the unpaved street. Small boys were having great fun floating on the cakes of ice.”

Clearly the sight of this forgotten creek was not uncommon, but this particular flood seemed to be “one of the worst rampages” they had witnessed. The un-pavement of Iowa Avenue seems too long ago to comprehend. Another account shines light on one of the mansions and important families of the time interacting with the creek. It seems that in the back of the Kenyon Mansion, the creek never froze for 30 years because of an old water main that had been running warm

water into the creek for that long.⁵ The creek was ignored by the masses and only came into view when it affected someone so severely that something had to be done. It became impossible to ignore and impossible to deny the importance of. It affected the entire town of Iowa City, Iowa for a very long time throughout history.

Many of the creeks of Johnson County have interesting histories and relevance, not just Ralston Creek. Some creeks are named either after who developed them, their geological features, or just a silly story that has been passed down for generations. McAllister Creek, for example, was named after James McAllister who erected the first cabin and settlement there in 1839. Otter Creek, on the other hand, was named as such because river otters are the playful animals that live on fish. They slide down mud banks head first into streams. The habitat in this area was favorable for these swimming mammals. Lastly, Jordan Creek was named because a Mr. Clarkson fell into an unknown stream. He said laughingly that he had been “dipped into Jordan.” The joke latched on so well to the disputes about true Bible baptism that it was kept a going; and that stream has been called Jordan Creek ever since.⁶ Creeks mean different things to different people, so it becomes easier and easier the relationship a community has with the creek by its name. If it’s named after a man no one has ever heard of, the relationship is probably minimal. But, the name had to of come from somewhere so it’s safe to say there is a great historical story behind the naming of it to tell.

The naming of other features of Iowa City also took place when Ralston Creek was given its name. Chauncey Swan, considered the founder of Iowa City for his work in site selection, layout, lot sales to benefit the territory and in commencing construction of Old Capitol, named a

⁵*Historical Stories About Iowa City*. By Irving Weber. Volume 4, page 57

⁶ Johnson County Soil and Water Conservation District: History of the Creek Names

street for John Ronalds and the creek for Ralston. He did not name anything for himself, but a century and a half later his name attached on a tiny green space across Washington Street from City Hall. It is not known why he chose to leave himself out of the naming process, but perhaps it speaks volumes for his character as a man who was more interested in developing a thriving community rather than getting the glory from being the founder. It's clear he did the most amount of work for developing the land so if anyone deserved naming commemoration, it was him.⁷

Unfortunately this is all that is known about Robert Ralston is his legacy as a commissioner for Iowa City. He had a wife and children, a farm in Burlington, and a great job in building the history of a newly founded state's legislature. He was not a punctual man, but one who stuck to his own guns and would be remembered for it for decades to come. His fellow commissioners sought revenge on his disruptive ways by naming a disruptive creek after him. A last and final revenge for a lack of punctuality on the part of Ralston's. While the capitol was never kept in Iowa City, it's safe to say that the history is rich and telling of the times. Creeks and rivers are a major part of life in Iowa as so much emphasis is placed on irrigation and industry for farming. A little run-off creek found its way through Iowa City and into history.

Now, why should people care about a little creek that flows through town? Because so much can be learned from it. Ralston Creek had flooded so many times before people cared about it. The efforts in clean-up and flood protection with the creek hold the key to prevention of similar occurrences today. The banks of the creek are rich in leafy grasses, weeds, trees, beavers, and garbage. The creek needs to remain a tended for, looked after piece of Iowa City. Waiting

⁷ Johnson County IAGenWeb Project. "Early Iowa City" by Bob Hibbs for the Press-Citizen. 2003.

until things have gotten too far there is nothing left that can be done is not an option. The people who live by and walk next to the creek everyday should be put in charge of its often rising waters. There have been many developments since the days of the “rampaging creek,” but the amount of pollution and debris surrounding it could still be heavily fixed. Local clean-up efforts do a great job at clearing this rubbish during Sundays in April; the people of the creek need to make sure that volunteering to clean is still a priority. Local bars and restaurants occasionally serve the volunteers a meal or a cold drink, which has proven very beneficial in maintaining interest in volunteering at the little creek that drains its water into the Iowa River.

An effort on what to do about the flooding and run-off sites of Iowa City has been a lengthy process. Following the floods of 2008, committees have been formed on and off, but often are unable to make much significant change due to lack of funding. There are still people living in FEMA trailers whose homes were destroyed due to the massive amounts of damaged caused by creeks and watersheds everywhere including the Iowa and Cedar Rivers. It seems that floods will always be a major source of stress to communities that live near water. There is no escaping a creek and river system that span the entirety of the state of Iowa. The Mississippi and Missouri rivers line Iowa’s borders. Iowa really has been constructed sandwiched in between two major and unavoidable watersheds.

In conclusion, if I had to re-name this creek, it would surely be something like the “Forgotten Creek.” The residents surrounding the banks of Ralston Creek only seem to remember it’s there and care for it when it’s about to flood or so full of garbage and tree brush that it needs volunteers to help clean it. The creek full of rich history has become the creek full of blankets, irons, bicycles, and sometimes even homeless people. It has made an indent through time as dozens of bridges and fences have been put upon it to make life surrounding it a little bit

easier, but so much more still needs to be done. The time is now to realize Ralston Creek as a site of interest. Robert Ralston's history has died as nearly no one knows anything about him anymore; let's not make the same mistake with a creek that has the potential to flood.

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