

# "The Importance of the Mississippi River to the State of Iowa and the North-West," Essay from *The Annals of Iowa*, 1871

*THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER TO THE STATE OF IOWA AND THE NORTH-WEST.*

*BY J. E. GRIFFITH, C. E. IN CHARGE OF LOCK AND STONE WORK, DES MOINES RAPIDS CANAL, KEOKUK, IOWA.*

Situated as the state of Iowa is, geographically considered, it is an inland state, but commercially it is most assuredly not so ; or at least it should not be. It lies between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers which, combined, constitute the largest navigable stream in the world. It does not require a very sagacious mind to comprehend the design of the Architect of the Universe in extending to the interior and through the heart of the greatest agricultural country in the world, rich in soil and mineral wealth, abundant in intelligence and enterprise, the most beautiful river, the "Father of Waters," coursing its way from the cold mountain peaks of the northwest through a country now abounding in peace, freedom and unity, to the sea. As a grand artery beating its way to the ocean, the heart of waters, it should throb with the life of the great north-west, and convey to the world the knowledge that, as long as its waters would tend to the grand reservoir — the Atlantic, so also would the Mississippi valley continue to prosper and thrive. It is said that the Mississippi river is a stream not commensurate with its apparent magnitude.

Not so : it is true that there are obstructions at certain points whereby uninterrupted communication cannot be offered to the shippers and producers of Iowa with the sea ; but these obstructions can and will be removed, provided the people of Iowa and other states of the Mississippi valley take an interest in the project and insist that their rights to a portion of the great improvement expenditures, be asserted. It is the duty of the representatives of this great state to truly represent the wants and wishes of their constituents, and demand with proper means, the disbursement of a goodly portion of the revenues of this country for the thorough and unimpeded improvement of the Mississippi river, so that we can ship our grain from Dubuque, Davenport, Muscatine, Burlington, and Keokuk direct to Europe, Brazil, and other foreign parts, without being subjected to the monopolizing influence of railroads, which have been, so far in the history of our state, corporation lotteries, whereby a few have prospered at the expense of the many. Although an increase of railroads will, in time, undoubtedly decrease the rates of tariff which we are compelled to pay in order to find a suitable market for the immense products of our fertile soil, and the industry of our population, still we will never attain the end which we deserve, until we fully take advantage of this grand avenue which the Almighty has caused to course on our very borders.

Surplus produce needs a market wherein we can compete with other states. Water lines of communication when properly managed have ever been of immense value to the countries which they drain. Canals have been constructed through portions of other states in order to afford outlets for cereals, live stock, and other sources of revenue. But we have a natural canal of great magnitude, an

ocean in itself, whereby with a small amount of expenditure in improvements, our state can save millions in treasure. The only obstructions to the free navigation of the Mississippi are at Davenport and Keokuk. These can be overcome in two or three years. Already the channel improvements at the first named place are rapidly approaching completion, and in less than three years a heavily laden craft from the upper Mississippi can deposit its cargo safely in New Orleans or Mobile. To obviate the dangers of the delta of the Mississippi, a canal is being constructed from a point ten miles below New Orleans to the sound, west of Mobile, shortening the distance to the sea, and doing away with the risk which our valley has refused to assume in shipment of produce. At Keokuk, the Des Moines rapids are being flanked by means of a ship canal with three locks. At Rock Island a channel two hundred feet wide with five feet of water in lowest water known, is being excavated across the various chains or rapids which have been the terror of steamboatmen. The sandbars and snags of the river at various points are being cleaned out by artificial means. In other words, a few far-seeing minds have taken an interest in the improvement of the Father of Waters, and are working with herculean efforts to throw at our very doors the means of saving our moneys and benefiting our and other states. But the 1,200,000 population of Iowa should grasp the importance of this project.

Let us now see what profit we will have in making the Mississippi river our channel of communication with the rest of the world. Let us see what we can effect, and how we can do away with the terrible railroad monopolies which have been the only drawbacks to the progress of our state. It is useless to suppose that ALL are not interested in this matter, and it will be well worth the while for each and every thinking man of Iowa to study the matter thoroughly and lend his assistance in the prosecution of all the improvement plans. It is but a few years since the people of Iowa saw fit to consider the importance of the removal of rebel obstructions on the banks of the lower Mississippi. When Belmont, Columbus, Fort Pillow, Memphis, Vicksburg, and Port Hudson were placed in defiance of the rights of the northwest, of the free navigation of its waters, every man expressed his indignation by offering life, limb, or treasure in removing, by force of arms, the blockades. Since that successful opening of the river and removal of artificial obstructions, all seem to forget that a campaign is necessary for the removal of natural obstructions. Our state is in the era of enormous agricultural productions — surpassing the wildest estimate ever made by enthusiast (sic). Our population is increasing at a wonderful rate. With the grand future now opening, with the prestige and renown of our noble state, with our fertile soil and salubrious climate, Iowa has before her a most magnificent destiny if it be not marred by folly and grasping avarice; nature has never spread a fairer and nobler field for the enterprising genius of human liberty than the great prairies of Iowa. Let the masses of the people therefore comprehend, accept, and vindicate their great destiny.

There is one proposition we can start with, and that is, that our productions here in Iowa exceed the capacity of transportation, and that enlarged water facilities must be had to the east in order to protect our producing classes from being robbed of the fruits of their earnings by the existing lines of communication. The present railroads and canals being wholly inadequate to transport our products, the people have to submit to any rates of freight that avarice and cupidity may demand. All the losses consequent upon the delays and irregularities attending this transportation of our products which flow from this state of things fall upon our producers. Our farmers must have other outlets for their products, and at the earliest practicable moment too. Railroads have been constructed throughout the length and breadth of our state. The people expected to receive greater benefits thereby. True, they have realized some, but not in such quantity as should be commensurate with the assistance rendered by them to these companies. The whole railroad system of this state has now become a vast and terrible monopoly, hitherto unknown, and undreamed of in a free country. The people have been appalled by the impudence and boldness with which these merciless corporations have, without reason, excuse, or explanation advanced prices, and their just indignation is everywhere finding vent. It is a matter which comes home to every farmer, and finds its way to the firesides of all the cottages

which dot our vast prairies. Are the hard earnings of the farmer, moistened with the sweat of his brow, to go into the already overgorged pockets of bloated and mammoth monopolies, or shall he be graciously permitted to have some of the fruits of his toil left to support his family, to support schools and educate his children, to improve his farm, to enlarge and beautify his home and enable him to occupy what should be the proud position of an Iowa farmer?

These are questions that are coming home to the fireside of all the farmers. It may be said that the combined power and wealth of all these corporations are strong and overwhelming; that, by their constant efforts, acting in concert, and hedging up the avenues to public opinion by silencing the press, they will divide and distract, and finally defeat us. Admitting their power, managed by the best minds in the country, controlled by men of intellect and sagacity, hacked up by untold wealth, the man who does not see in the future a terrific struggle between the oppressed and oppressor, is "neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet." By looking at the Mississippi river and thinking of the incalculable value of its broad expanse of water, the solution of the problem can be obtained. It is now known that the great drawback to the navigation of that river consists in the Rock Island and Des Moines Rapids. These obstructions interfere with the free navigation of the river to an extent little known and but lightly appreciated. They are a tax of millions upon millions of dollars annually upon the people of the Mississippi valley, who live above them. With the rapids "cleaned out," the fabulous amounts of grain raised in western and northwestern Illinois, western Wisconsin, in Iowa and Minnesota, would find a market by the way of the Mississippi river and new Orleans, instead of by the lakes and canals, unless the prices of freight by this last named route should be reduced so that grain could go as cheap that way as by the river. In such a case, the farmers everywhere would have the benefit of the reduction of rates forced by the Mississippi competition.

With the rapids improved, so that they would no longer be an impediment to the river navigation, there is no doubt in the minds of practical men who have thoroughly investigated the subject, that grain and flour can be taken to the seaboard market in the east vastly cheaper than present rates by the lakes and canals. With good navigation, with elevators and other facilities for moving grain at St. Louis and New Orleans, with new and competing lines of transportation, wheat can be transported from the upper Mississippi to New York for thirty five cents per bushel, while to-day it costs sixty cents or more per bushel to send it by way of Chicago and Buffalo. This is a saving to the producer of twenty-five cents per bushel in favor of the river route to market. The idea that wheat and corn will not bear transportation through the heats of the gulf stream is not well founded. With the regular and swift lines of propellers from New Orleans to the eastern cities, the transit of the products of the valley of the Mississippi would be quick and certain.

When we figure the vast amount of wheat raised in the states I have mentioned, which would find its way to the market by the river, were it unobstructed, we can readily see the millions of dollars which would be saved to the people of that section every year, counting the saving at twenty-five, twenty, or even fifteen cents per bushel. Remove these obstructions, and our producers will then have a convenient and adequate outlet to the markets on our own seaboard and of Europe. They can market their grain in London and Liverpool, be successful competitors of European producers on their own soil, and eventually control the price of breadstuffs in the very center of the world's trade. In Europe land is scarce and rent ruinously high; the consequence is, that our farmers, who have cheap lands and mechanical labor can produce grain with profit, at figures that would ruin the European farmer. The only obstacle that prevents western producers from underselling and, by successful competition, driving foreign producers from their own market, is the want of cheap transportation. For the past five years the average price per bushel of wheat in London and Liverpool has been \$1.37 in gold, or \$1.90 of our own currency. The English farmers cannot produce it at a less cost with any profit. The land is mostly held by the nobility, who exact as rental therefor forty per cent, of the productions. Improve

these rapids, and grain can be sent from Iowa to New Orleans for twenty cents, and thence to Liverpool for seventeen cents, including cost of trans-shipment; thus netting our farmers at least one dollar and fifty cents per bushel, and giving them the power to undersell the English farmer in his own market, and eventually compel him to seek other pursuits.

Nor is it unreasonable to suppose that three-fifths of the grain and flour of these states would choose the river route; because with uninterrupted navigation, grain will find a better market on the Mississippi than on the lake, and farmers in the eastern parts of Illinois and Wisconsin will find it to their interest to look westward to the new market thus established.

It is objected that wheat cannot be shipped through the gulf without injury. The fact is that the United States exports wheat and flour to Portugal, Brazil and Australia; and England imports largely from Turkey and Egypt. Yet all this commerce is across the tropics, through a climate subject to the influences which prevail in the gulf; besides, thirty years ago, before railroad connections between the east and the west, the surplus wheat of the Ohio valley was sent by flatboats to New Orleans, and thence by vessel to New York; in this way New Orleans came to enjoy a large export trade in produce. If wheat would bear shipment by that route then, will it not bear shipment by that route now? But it is a noticeable fact that this fear of wheat or flour spoiling in the gulf is of eastern origin; it comes through Chicago. It is an old story — much harped upon by enemies of river navigation that the Mississippi cannot be so improved that it will have the capacity to compete with railroads. Not so; the improvements now going on will be satisfactory; all who see them believe so. The strongest river men, began, at one time, to think that they must learn pastoral life, and resign themselves to their fate, and allow the river to dwindle to insignificance. The aspect of affairs is now changed, and we promise to follow with our commerce our great river to the gulf.

Before the war, St. Louis did not export a single bushel of grain southward, in bulk, and as a consequence the market was easily glutted. Now, all is changed. One elevator of 1,250,000 bushels capacity at St. Louis, lines of boats and barges for cheap transportation south, floating elevators at New Orleans, and vessels towing this freight to all the world, make a picture calculated to gladden the hearts of the farmers of Iowa. The promise is that grain will go to Liverpool for thirty cents per bushel. Let improvements continue; let this commerce increase; let these rapids be improved; let 100,000,000 bushels be exported by way of this river, and the price here will be better one day and year with another, than it is in Chicago. Then will Iowa farmers be in as good a situation as Illinois farmers — nay, Illinois farmers will desire to change with us, even.

Chicago papers tell us sagely that we must address ourselves to raising stock; that we are too far off to raise corn, barley, and wheat for export. We tell Chicago — and we love and honor Chicago—her enterprise, her intelligence, her activity, and thrift we admire; she is a wonder, an American wonder; but we tell her not to put on airs to her sister state. Iowa must have a state policy. We must magnify our rivers and their commerce. We must improve the good gifts that our Father has given us; we must have a policy — Our railroads must be operated as Iowa railroads, and they must not discriminate against the Mississippi as a channel of commerce. Let Illinois thrive. Let Chicago rise — we care not how high, but not by appropriating the fruit of our toil. Let her look out for Chicago, we will try to look out for Iowa. This state policy will, in the long run, be the best for all Iowa railroads. Let our farmers have cheap transit to the river, and the railroads across our state will be busy in carrying freight to the river. But if they insist in discriminating against the Mississippi, and forcing freight to Chicago, then soon the north and south roads will head them off by their routes to St. Louis, and their Chicago freights are gone.

During the coming winter let it be the main object of Iowa's representatives, as well as those of other states of the Mississippi valley, to obtain an appropriation that will quickly complete all these improvements. The sum appropriated last winter was so meager that work was stopped on August 1st, when there remained four of the best working months of the year. All this because there were no moneys. Compare the amounts appropriated annually for the improvement of harbors on sea and lake coasts, where the tonnage and shipments are slight, with the paltry sums given for the thousands of miles of our river coast, with its millions of tonnage and a billion of capital. Is it just? Is it our proportion of the national treasure? Most assuredly not. Let our press agitate the matter; let our foremost men proclaim it in the halls of legislation, and in a short time the country at large will see that the great northwest is alive to its interests, and will have its rights. The consequence will finally be that the agricultural interests of Iowa and other western states will, in due time, become as advantageous, pecuniarily (sic), as the commercial and manufacturing interests of the states of the east are to them.