

Transcribed Excerpts from "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 ... As a grand artery beating its way to the ocean ... 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 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 ...

... 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 ... 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 ... At Keokuk, the Des Moines rapids are being flanked by means of a ship canal with three locks ... 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 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 ...

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 ... Our farmers must have other outlets for their products, and at the earliest practicable moment too ... The whole railroad system of

this state has now become a vast and terrible monopoly ... The people have been appalled by the impudence and boldness with which these merciless corporations have, without reason, excuse, or explanation advanced prices ... Are the hard earnings of the farmer ... 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 ... 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 ... 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 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 ...

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 ... The only obstacle that prevents western producers from underselling ... 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 ... 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 markets ...

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.