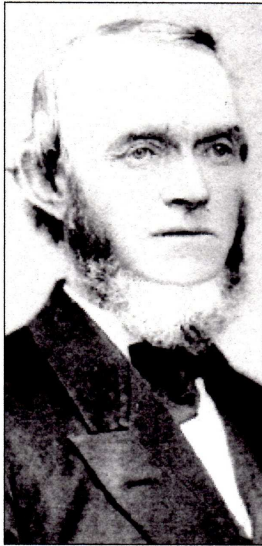


# George B. Gaston and Tabor, Iowa



Uneducated as a youth, his dream as an adult was to build a college. Before pursuing that dream, he farmed in Ohio, worked with Pawnee Indians in Nebraska, endured floods along the Missouri River in Iowa, helped slaves escape to freedom and founded a town, Tabor, Iowa.

George was first identified as a young farmer with a missionary spirit. He could build houses, till the soil, blacksmith, work a sawmill and mill grain. Described in his obituary as “*active and mechanically*

*inclined and not especially fond of books and study.* “ - he managed to at least complete his formal education and one term at Hudson College, OH. He was a kind man who could be counted upon, hard working, generous, committed to Christian service.

Born in Danby New York, to farming parents in 1814, at the age of 19, he moved with them to Oberlin, Ohio – near the recently opened Oberlin College. He married Maria Cummings in 1837 – built a shanty and their first son, Alexander Cummings Gaston was born in 1838. When locals refused to assist raising his barn because he refused to provide the whiskey – some Oberlin professors and students did it so quickly that they were gone before the pie prepared was served. He joined the Congregational Church.

In March of 1840, George and Maria set off for Nebraska as a “farming Missionary” to the Pawnee under the American Board of Commissioners for foreign Missions. It was a difficult journey – they crossed the Missouri in a log Canoe – Maria was eight months pregnant with a two year old. They stopped to grow crops and she gave birth to a son, Alonzo.

**Oberlin College** was of the most progressive colleges of the time – founded by a pair of New School Presbyterian ministers in 1833. It was first to admit women (1837) and African Americans (1835). It was a hotbed of Abolitionism and a key stop on the Underground Railway. and prominent in sending missionaries. It was associated with Charles Finney and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Awakening.

**The Pawnee Mission 1834-1846** of the **American Board of Commissioners For Foreign Missions** was located on the Loup River in Nebraska, a tributary of the Platte where the Pawnee had four earth lodge villages. Missionaries John Dunbar and Samuel Allis believed conversion to Christianity could not occur until the Indians rejected their traditional lifestyle and at least began to dress and act like solid New England farmers. George B. Gaston opposed this view arguing that the first duty of the missionary was to convert the non-Christian because “civilization” was an outgrowth of Christianity. The Government Treaty of 1833 promised annuities expecting the Pawnee to give up their hunts to make more land available for settlement. Continuing attacks by the Sioux forced abandonment of the Mission.

They pressed on the next Spring. Planting crops proceeded building housing and Maria was left for 22 days as George and Dunbar took a wagon to get supplies. A long time to live in a wagon or tent with three young children - a daughter, Euphelia was born in 1842. Assistant Missionary George was to farm, and teaching farming. The Indians refused to give up their buffalo hunts. The Gastons had many trials – missions leaders were lazy and self-serving – no schools were started. Pawnee's culture was ignored and no opportunity was given to learn language. Conflicts arose over money and doctrine. George recruited his sister Elvira and her husband, Lester Platt to come to teach and pleaded unsuccessfully for a minister to be sent to minister the Gospel. The Gastons witnessed bloody attacks on the Pawnee villages



Maria Cummings Gaston

beginning with the massacre of a village in June 1843 by Sioux warriors. In 1843 a hungry John C. Fremont, the explore and future Presidential candidate stumbled into the mission. In 1846, Indian warfare forced them to the Government station at Bellevue, where they met Brigham Young, in Winter Quarters on the migration to Utah, who had clothing sewn for

Elvira's Indian children by a couple of Mormon seamstresses. The Mission closed. Elvira and Lester Platt settled by the Missouri River in Iowa where she had a school for Indians. Illness forced George and his family back to Oberlin in 1846. The Gastons left good a impression upon the Pawnee and lifetime friendships were made though there weren't any converts.

In the summer of 1847 George was working in the harvest field when there came to him, an inspiration “*Why can not another institution like Oberlin be planted upon the prairies of the west?*” So he recruited four men to join him. One of them was Rev. John Todd, pastor at Clarksville, Ohio, a graduate of Oberlin. George said to him “*Come, go with us. I can't say much about salary. But while I live, you shall live.*” Along with him,

Samuel H. Adams – a woodworker and carpenter. J.B. Hall, and Darius P. Matthews – a party of ten. After a difficult journey west by wagon, rail, boat and buggy, in 1848, they tried to set up their community at Civil Bend, Iowa where the Platts had a school for Indian Children. Facing great hardships, they built homes and planted crops. Todd and Hall went back by horseback and fetched their families. When a black family that had bought its freedom moved into the community- George put up the money to bond them. This family worshiped with them and their children were in the school. In response Pro-slavery folk from nearby burned down the school house. Later, early in the Civil War, George rode to the rescue of their two sons kidnapped and taken St. Louis to be sold into slavery.

But two years of flooding and mosquitoes drove the group from Oberlin to the higher ground of a nearby plateau which they named “Tabor“ after the mountain near Nazareth. The Congregational church organized with eight members. Work proceeded in Tabor as homes were built, crops grown. A quarry started. George ran a mill for lumber and grain. Claims proven. Both a school and church began in George's home. George and Maria took in an orphaned nephew, Loren Hume, and other adopted children.

Meanwhile in nearby Kansas the beginnings of “war” over abolishing slavery spilled over into Tabor. On July 4, 1854, the first “passengers” on the Underground Railroad passed through Tabor. Many Tabor residents were involved in this “illegal” activity at great and perilous risk. The Gaston house hid and “conducted escaping slaves on a regular basis for a decade.

Abolitionists James Lane and John Brown found Tabor a place of refuge from warrants for their arrest in Kansas and Missouri. Travel on the rivers was closed to “Free Soilers,” Dr. Samuel Howe – one of Brown's “Secret Six” supporters and the husband of Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* – laid a route across southern Iowa to Tabor for anti-slavery emigrants heading for Kansas. James Lane, a Congressman and Mexican War hero, blazed the trail from Tabor 136 miles through Kansas to Topeka, marked by piles of rocks and bypassing settlements providing free-state settlers a safe route into Kansas. “Lane's Trail” in reverse was a route for escaping slaves via Tabor to Canada.

By late July 1856, wagon train after wagon train had arrived in Tabor, transforming the quiet town into something resembling a military camp numbering about 400 settlers, only a fourth of whom were actually “Lane's men.” Other large parties followed through 1857.

Maria Gaston reminisced “*The summer and autumn of 1856 our houses, before too full, were much over filled with those passing to and from Kansas. Wood sheds and barns became bedrooms and sickrooms. Comers and goers at all times of the day or night, meals at all hours.*”



Howe, Lane, Brown and others were responsible for the large shipments of weapons being cached in Tabor, intended for Kansas. **John Todd's house** and the Gaston home stored an arsenal of 500 Sharps rifles “aka Beecher's Bibles,” 200 revolvers, powder and ammunition, swords, even a cannon. With bounty hunters prowling about, pounding on doors late at night and threats of attacks like the burning of Lawrence Kansas by pro slavers – the need for means of defense was in their minds. Tabor formed a militia of 28 men under Gaston's leadership in July, 1856.

John Brown, after a number of bloody conflicts with pro-slavers and the “border ruffians” who had burned the homes of his sons at Brown's Station found a refuge in Tabor. Lane and Brown would be in and out Tabor frequently as they engaged in battles in “bleeding Kansas” and raids into Missouri. Both were often guests of the Gastons. Lane and the “jayhawkers” fought hard



in Kansas. Kansas became a free state in 1861 – Lane its first Senator. The people of Tabor did not know that Brown was formulating plans for a Guerrilla war in the East and an attack on Harpers Ferry while he was in their midst – he was very secretive, coding messages, evasive about his intentions and not even letting his sons, the “volunteers” who

came to Tabor to train or supporters know what his plans actually were. The Tabor community lost their confidence in Brown as his raids to free slaves in Missouri got violent and they adopted a resolution in February of 1859 withdrawing their “sympathy” for his methods. Soon after John Brown shipped his arsenal East, and left Tabor to prepare for his botched attempt to seize the Arsenal at Harper's Ferry in the fall of 1859 which led to his final moment of glory in a hangman's noose – a spark leading to The American Civil War.

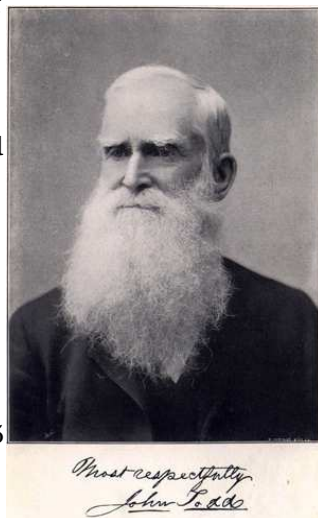
When the war came, George organized the first company and drilled it. But Maria resisted letting her sons go to the war. Alexander married, Alonzo went to Oberlin, but then came home. Alonzo Marcellus Gaston, a newly wed, marched off to the war with the 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Iowa Infantry in late 1862 and would die of sickness during the siege of Vicksburg at Memphis in March of 1863.

In 1853 the *Tabor Literary Institute* incorporated "the object of which shall be to harmoniously develop the moral, mental, and physical powers of those who enjoy its privileges. The privileges of the Institution shall be alike free to both sexes and all classes." John Todd and George Gaston persuaded William Brooks to become its teacher, and later the First President. In 1860 the Institute moved into its first building, a frame structure called "the Chapel".

When it finally came time to establish **Tabor College**, Tabor's resources were depleted by years of anti-slavery struggles and the war. George Gaston donated 10 acres for a park and 6 acres for a campus and put up half his own assets for its capitalization at a town meeting on June 14<sup>th</sup>. Other residents were equally generous.

In 1866, **Tabor College** finally became a reality. Four-year courses were offered in classical, scientific, and literary departments. Eventually the campus would build four brick buildings. **Tabor College** followed Oberlin's example in educating many women and Negroes. Graduates did missionary work in India, Turkey, Japan and Mexico; many became prominent educators in the West – over 200 became teachers. One educator opened Puget Sound Academy in Coupeville, Wa in 1886. Many were involved in home missions in California, New Mexico and Arizona. But, beset by continuing financial struggles the College closed its doors in 1927. Only one building remains - Adams Hall housed German POW's during WWII and now holds apartments.

**Tabor** was incorporated a Town with George Gaston as its first Mayor in 1868. John Todd served as pastor of the Congregational Church until his retirement in 1883. John Todd's house remains as a museum – part of the **Tabor Anti-Slavery Historic District**. In 1895, **Tabor** bragged about itself as "the Town that never had a Saloon," and its beautiful park. Its population in 1875 was only 295 – though about 200 students attended the College.



Bypassed in 1865 by the *Burlington and Missouri River Railway*, College Dean Thomas McClelland had the idea of a rail connection to the *CB&Q* tracks in Malvern to foster enrollment. *The Tabor and Northern Railway* was built in 1889 along a rather difficult hilly 8.79 mile route (dubbed by *Ripley's Believe it or Not* as the "World's shortest Standard gauge Railroad"). It ran for 30 years, until replaced by highways. A surge in population resulted – about 1,000 people in 1895 – still its current population.



But George Gaston would not live to see this. George died May 1, 1873 at the age of 58 of pneumonia and a weakened heart – complications brought about of injuries while lifting stone to build the Congregational Church. His will left 145 acres of timberland to the College – a larger portion of his estate than the law allowed, but his heirs refused to receive anything back from it.

Not only is **Tabor's** story a thriller on many levels, but it is a story of a people of strength, courage, intelligence, and selflessness. Among them was George B. Gaston. The Rev. William Brooks said in 1902 that George Gaston "would have been a marked man in any community. When he became a Christian it meant to him the devotion of his life, his thought, his property and his business abilities to the service of men for Christ's sake. He could always be relied upon to do promptly and joyfully that which he thought to be right, whatever sacrifice it might cost."

**Written by Barry McWilliams.**

His wife, Marianne, is George Gaston's Great Great Granddaughter.

**Sources:** Family genealogical accounts by Bob Gaston and others, *John Todd and The Underground Railroad* by James Patrick Morgan, *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid That Sparked the Civil War* by Tony Horwitz, *The Pawnee Mission Letters* by Richard Jensen; and plenty of Wikipedia and Google searches.