



John Todd House
1853-2026

TABOR HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Tabor College
1866-1927

Tabor Historical Society News Susan Shepherd

We're all looking forward to spring, and for THS that means the continuation of important restoration projects at the Todd House. Ongoing is the renovation of the upstairs windows in the home, a lengthy process, joined now by the rehabilitation of the south foundation which was started last summer. Using the services of the U.S. Heritage Group, a firm near Chicago that specializes in restoring old buildings, workers uncovered a 30-foot section in July exposing the original foundation to a depth of around four feet. The survey and analysis was sobering. The integrity of the exterior masonry wall is severely compromised with mortar having turned to powder or missing altogether. As well, shifting stones created instability, affecting the loadbearing function of the wall. The only way to fix it is to completely dismantle the wall and reconstruct it using original materials and techniques. The project will be tackled this summer and we look forward to its completion.



Above: loose foundation stones on the SW corner. Below: Large mounds of dirt after the exploratory excavation was completed.



Above: highschooler Blake Schaaf assisted in the excavation, seen here inspecting the interior basement wall. Notice the home's original log joists above his head. Below: initial digging was accomplished by hand. Later, mini excavators were brought in to finish the work.



The Diaries of John Todd

Diaries are an invaluable source of information to the historian when piecing together a picture of the past—diary entries not only record important events but often contain personal feelings toward what’s happening in the writer’s world. We are fortunate that the Reverend John Todd, one of Tabor’s founders, kept diaries from 1848 through 1891, most of which are in the possession of the Tabor Historical Society. Todd’s diaries are physically small, meant to be carried in a pocket, and didn’t leave much room for expansive entries. Todd also used abbreviations to save space. All the same, he kept a fascinating record of the life and times in southwest Iowa, as seen in these extracts, with comments below.

“Little Amelia Hill was taken ill with spotted fever and died this afternoon.” Apr 27, 1866.

Infant mortality was extremely high at this time—one in five children died before their fifth birthday. Todd attended Amelia’s funeral the next day. Todd had himself buried his infant son, David, who died from Cholera in 1854.

“Subscribed to Tabor College \$1,000. Whole sum subscribed this evening \$10,000.” Jun 28, 1866.

The building of Tabor College was done entirely through the labor and donations of the pioneers who settled in Tabor. As with all the donors, Todd’s subscription was a pledge which would be paid for in installments.

“Thanksgiving. Paid to Freedmen \$2. To Flora 10 cts toward a toothbrush, & \$2 toward Curtius’ gloves.” Nov 29, 1866.

Todd recorded all income and expenses. This entry showed that he donated to the Freedmen’s Association (a group that helped former slaves) and gave money to his daughter Flora and son Curtis.

“Coldest morn of the winter 18° below zero . . . 5° below at noon. Good prayer meeting in the eve & [Tabor College] trustee meeting afterwards.” Mar 13, 1867.

Todd never missed recording harsh weather conditions, which the pioneers didn’t let interfere with daily living and scheduled meetings.

“Earthquake in the P.M. at 2:45—house swayed to & fro & windows rattled. Neighbors noticed it—a phenomenon I never before experienced.” Apr 24, 1867.

Tabor was rocked by a rare earthquake centered near Manhattan, Kansas, estimated by modern geologists to have been 5.5 on the Richter Scale.

“About 1½ AM wife rose in bed & waked me by saying she believed she was going to have one of her bad turns. I had just time to take hold of her & she was gone. In about 15 min she began to be conscious and continued nursing her through the night . . . Dr. Hanley tried to bleed her but could get no blood.” May 27, 1868.

Martha Todd suffered from epilepsy, and she had regular seizures. Medical science of the era postulated it was some kind of brain disorder and sometimes applied treatments that caused more harm than good. In this entry Todd noted that local doctor Richard Hanley came to his home and attempted to bleed Martha, a common medical practice believed to cure a wide variety of illnesses.

“Repairing shoes \$1.00, water pail 35 cts, 7 lbs crackers \$1.40, 2¾ lbs cheese 40 cts, dried herrings 10 cts.” Aug 11, 1868.

Another list of daily expenses. It’s likely the goods and services came from Tabor’s general store.

“Attended first municipal election in Tabor.” Mar 1, 1869.

The town was incorporated in 1868 and George Gaston, one of Tabor’s founders, was elected as its first mayor.

“Wrote to Harriet Townshend, 22 cents postage.” Dec 28, 1870.

The Congregationalists who settled Tabor were evangelical Christians and supported missionaries throughout the world. Harriet Townshend was a local woman who left Tabor for Ceylon (Sri Lanka today) to teach school and spread her faith. She and Todd carried on a regular correspondence before her death from disease overseas in 1882. She was 41 years old.

“Louisa rose from her bed and in her night clothes, with only stockings on her feet, went out to the chicken house and was found by James [her brother] and carried in—she said she ought to be drowned.” Jan 29, 1872.

John and Martha’s oldest daughter, Mary Louisa (known as Louisa) suffered from depression and insomnia most of her adult life. Diagnosed at the time with melancholia, her mental state deteriorated to the point that she was taken to Clarinda State Hospital, where she passed in 1897.

“Mercury minus 25 in Tabor, minus 22 Hillsdale, minus 28 Creston. Walked to Hillsdale in two hours and arrived in time for train. Council met at Creston and organized a church of 7 members.” Jan 28, 1873.

Distances walked by the early settlers tend to amaze modern readers. Todd commonly walked the eight miles to Hillsdale to catch the train and bone chilling temperatures didn’t stop him. He attended a Congregational Church Association meeting in Creston.

“Adjusted and helped install ridge pole and braces in church roof. Aug 19, 1873.”

The Congregational Church was built entirely by local labor and Todd helped in every stage of construction. Completed in 1875, structure had a seating capacity of one thousand.

“M.L. Carpenter’s store was entered and money taken from the till by Willie West aided by Chas Kempton. Sep 19, 1875.”

Milo Carpenter owned and operated Tabor’s first general store. The accused, both boys, were taken before Tabor’s magistrate. Todd did not record the disposition of the case.

“Bertha and Emily Gaston with Puss smashed the buggy.” Jul 13, 1878.

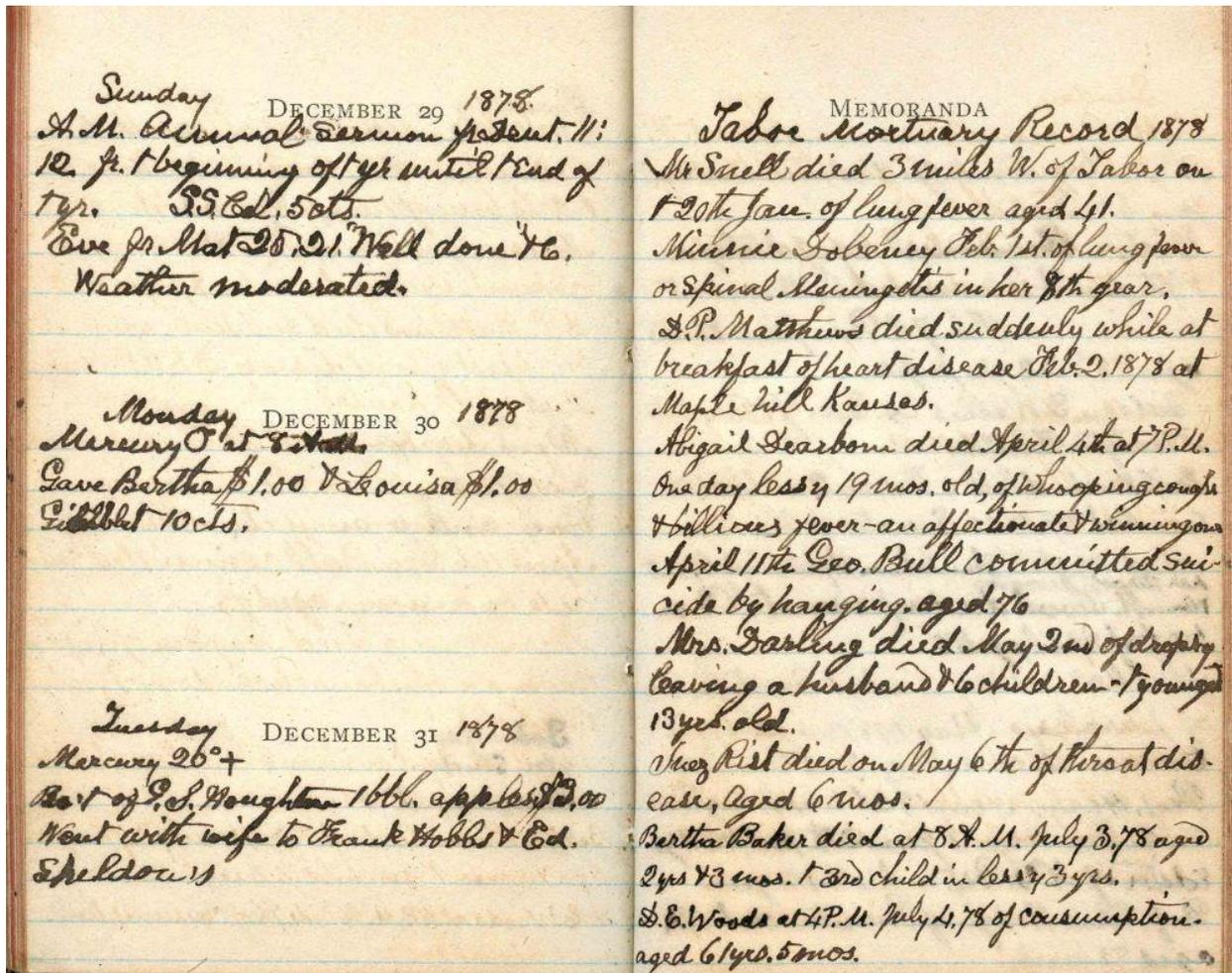
In a passage modern parents can sympathize with when they see their sons and daughters drive off in the family car, Todd’s youngest daughter, Bertha, smashed the family buggy while riding with her friend, Emily Gaston. Puss was the family horse. Repairs cost Todd 85 cents to mend the harness and \$2.75 for repair of the frame and wheels at the blacksmith shop.

"Went to the woods to C [see] about some stolen wood. Found ten small hickory trees out from 5 to 8 inches thro. They were drawn away by a wagon. Jan 17, 1879."

Homes were largely heated by woodstoves, so the theft of trees or logs was taken seriously. About a week later two men confessed to the theft of two cords and offered to pay for it.

"Eve Xmas tree, wife got coffee mill & can of fruit, silk handkerchief. I got carpet & stove. Dec 24, 1879."

Members of the Congregational Church erected a tree in the church and placed presents beneath it which were opened Christmas Eve. As seen in this passage, gifts were usually of a practical nature.



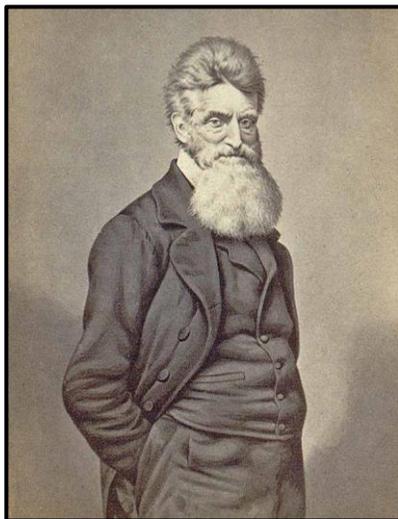
Pages from Todd's diary in December 1878. As was typical, he recorded sermons he had delivered, one in the morning and the other in the evening—on different topics—to accommodate parishioners who went to both. He also recorded expenses of \$1.00 given to his daughters Bertha and Louisa, as well as \$2.00 for one pound of apples, purchased from George Houghton, a professor at Tabor College. He also listed Tabor deaths for the year, which included infants and a suicide.

John Brown Did *What*?

When picking up a nonfiction book, readers anticipate that the information will be accurate, made so through careful editing and vetting of historical facts. But this is not always so. One example comes from a 1936 travel guide for southwestern Iowa, which provided a comprehensive overview of towns, geography, and landmarks in the region. However, the book also states, “Tabor is perhaps best known because it was the headquarters for John Brown during the Civil War.” Brown did in fact use Tabor as a safe haven during his fighting in Kansas Territory, camping his men in the park, storing weapons in the Todd House, and bringing runaway slaves into town on their trek to freedom. But John Brown was not in Tabor during the Civil War, for the simple reason he was dead, having been executed by the Commonwealth of Virginia December 2, 1859. He was convicted of treason, murder, and inciting a slave rebellion after being captured at Harper’s Ferry.

Far more serious errors are found in the 2005 book *John Brown, Abolitionist*, by David S. Reynolds. The author describes Tabor as a “Quaker dominated town [that] disapproved of violence.” In another section, Jonas Jones, one of Tabor’s earliest settlers, was likewise labeled as a Quaker. The town of Tabor was settled by followers of the Congregational, not Quaker faith. As for disapproving of violence, in a broad sense that was true. But Tabor’s Congregationalists were not pacifists, as were the Quakers, and were willing and able to defend their community if needed. Evidence of this is found in the town forming an armed military company (militia) in 1856 to respond to the growing violence in the Kansas Territory. The roots of Congregationalism were found with the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay—when they moved west, they called their church Congregational and were immensely proud of their faith and heritage. Although the Quakers were Christians and played an important part in Iowa’s Underground Railroad, they settled in Salem, in southeast Iowa. Reynolds described Brown’s pleasure from being in Tabor because he was around “like-minded folks” and in fact he was, because Brown, like the village of Tabor, had deep Puritan (not Quaker) roots.

It’s important for readers (and we hope you *do* read) to be critical of historical facts, regardless of where you find them. Remaining skeptical and checking an author’s source material is never a waste of time.



Abolitionist John Brown



Historical markers commemorating John Brown and the Underground Railroad in Tabor Park. The original concrete marker (right) was placed in 1910, joined in 2021 by a more detailed description of Tabor’s contributions.

Having Fun in Tabor Through the Years



No dogs, just candy

As has been the custom for several years, Jeanne and Harry Wilkins dressed up as John and Martha Todd and handed out Halloween candy at the Todd House. Even though the Todds would not have approved (celebrating Halloween was a serious no-no back in the day), the kids love it, as do Jeanne and Harry. There are always surprises—some of the younger children ask, “are you *really* the Todds?” On another occasion, a young boy walked right past the offered candy, looked through the screen door, and asked if there was a dog inside.



Kick that broom!

Tabor college students blowing off steam (maybe they just finished final exams) near the Todd House, around 1912. They’re doing some remarkable “high kicking” caught without image blurring, an impressive feat considering the capabilities of camera equipment of the day. Notice the Todd House still had shutters on the windows, removed years ago.



Everyone, smile!

The cast of “The Tom Thumb Wedding,” performed at the Congregational Church in May 1915. The play was popular throughout the U.S. during this time and relied exclusively on children. Sponsored by Tabor’s Woman’s Union, a special producer was hired from Kansas City

who supplied costumes and training. The cast was large to limit the number of lines the little ones had to memorize. The bride was played by Ethel Dalton, the groom was Delbert Watkins and Charles Wells was the minister (seen with his arms crossed, wearing glasses). The play was a big hit with some “tots doing the unexpected which provided even more amusement,” according to the Tabor Beacon.