

Oak Leaves

Family Legacy Series

Oak Hill Cemetery Association

1705 Mt. Vernon Rd. S. E. • Cedar Rapids, Iowa 52403

Oak Hill Cemetery is non-profit lot owner association dedicated to preserving the heritage of Linn County, Iowa.

Oak Hill Cemetery – The Calder, Rock & Keeler Family

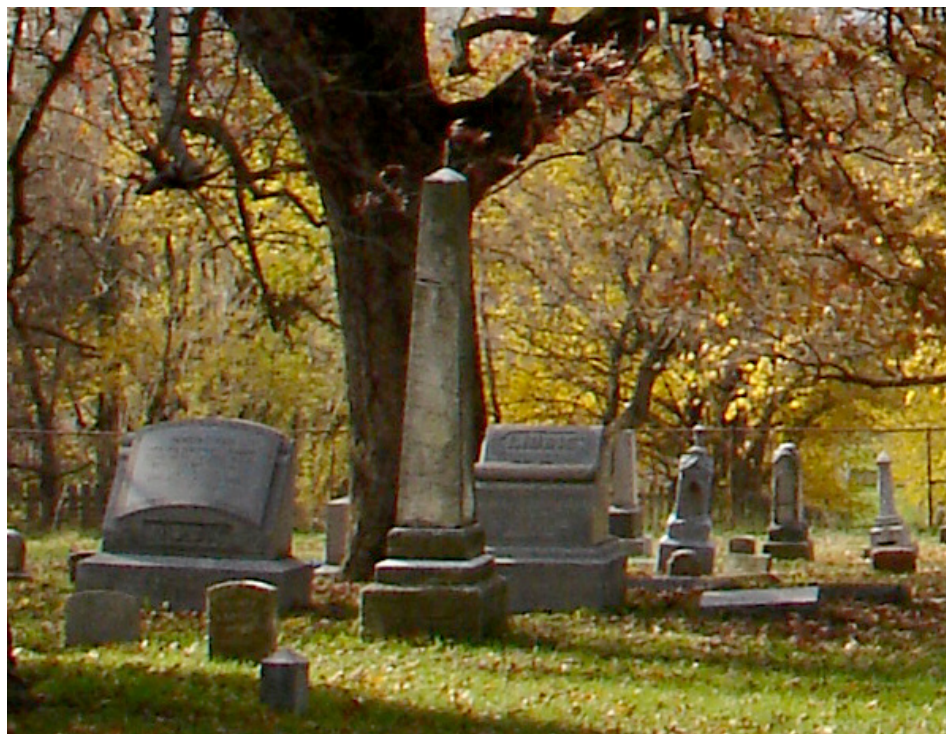
Just southwest of the central crossroads of the original plot of the cemetery, on what would have been considered the Grand Entrance of the Cemetery in 1854 is the family plot of former mayor R. C. Rock and his wife the former Elizabeth Calder. This is their story.



Reuben C. Rock

Reuben C. Rock, was born in 1820, in Lititz, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania the son of Peter and Susan (Christ) Rock, and spent the first fifteen years of his life there. Then he went to Illinois, where he had a brother-in-law living, who had large landed(?) interests.

He resided in Burlington, Iowa, for several years where he was employed as clerk in a mercantile establishment and in 1851 came to Cedar Rapids and opened the first hardware store in the place. He also erected one of the first brick store buildings, (*possibly built in 1856 as Rock & Camp*) and carried on business as a hardware dealer until 1859, when he entered the freight office of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern Railroad where he remained 28 years.



Elizabeth Calder Rock

Mr. R. C. Rock was united in marriage with Miss Elizabeth Calder in Cedar Rapids on the 15th of May, 1855. Her parents Joseph and Ellen (Keeling) Calder, were natives of England, came to America, locating in Cherry Valley, New York.

Mr. & Mrs. Rock were among the earliest members of Grace Episcopal Church. He served as vestryman for about thirty-five years, while she was a teacher in the Sunday school for the same length of time and very active in all church work

It was in 1849 that Mrs. Rock (*then a young Elizabeth Calder*) came west with a brother and sister, despite the objections of her parents due to reports

of a cholera outbreak along the road to Dubuque. She arrived at the request of Judge Greene, a cousin, to assist him in getting out his first volume of Iowa Reports, which was printed in New York. After spending about a year in Dubuque Iowa, she took up her residence in Cedar Rapids, again with the judge and assisted materially in getting ready for the press and in proofreading the matter for the other volumes of his Reports. The two children of Judge Greene had been committed to her care by their dying mother. The members of the Supreme Court would frequently gather in Cedar Rapids in chambers to prepare their opinions and to OK them for publication. Mrs. Rock did much of the law copying for these judges. Their decisions were turned over to her to record and to edit

for publication. For a time Mrs. Rock also did editorial work on an early Linn County newspaper called the Progressive Era, which was published from the Greene Brothers building.

It was also her purpose to start a girls' school in the new town, which then had between three and four hundred inhabitants. Instruction was given in French, drawing, piano and watercolor. Miss Calder's school prospered; and two other teachers were secured; one from New York for the piano, and another, Miss Parkhurst, to assist in the English branches. Miss Calder herself continued with some of the English grades, also with French and Drawing. Pupils came from Dubuque, Muscatine, Burlington, Fairfield, Vinton and Marion, but after a few years failing health obliged Mrs. Rock to relinquish her work in this line, and a year later the school ceased to exist.

She also assisted Judge Greene in establishing a Sunday school in her schoolroom in the second story of Greene Brothers building, at the corner of First Avenue and First Street, this room became a regular place for Episcopal worship. At the establishment of the Home Aged Women, she was appointed a member of the first board of managers.

Respected in the community, there were many accounts of her life documented in the writings of others. I have taken excerpts from The Biographical Record of Linn County Iowa, The History of Linn County from its Earliest Times by Brewer & Wick and the many newspaper accounts of milestone birthdays and anniversaries associated with the Grace Episcopal Church.

She says in her first years here the people took the best magazines of the day, passing them around so that all might read them. In 1852 there was organized a literary circle of ladies and gentlemen. This circle met once a week at the homes of the members. Original papers were read at these meetings, the subjects being assigned in advance.

In one large room in this building (the three story building built by the Greene Brothers) Miss Calder, from New York, opened a school for girls in the fall of 1850. In a hall on the third floor, a



Masonic lodge was organized the same year. Miss Calder [Mrs. Rock] drew designs for the emblems and tended to making the aprons.

In a Chapter of one of these books titled Society in the Early days, the author tells off an 83 year old Mrs. Rock has vivid recollections of beginnings in Linn county. She goes on to state, "Occasionally there were formal parties, as in these days. There was a greater amount of entertaining a half century or more ago here than there is now. There were no special distinctions of class, all the citizens were welcomed. Dr. and Mrs. Ely entertained a great deal in their home, Mr. and Mrs. S. C. Bever were always hospitable, and the Greenes did their share. The author goes on to state "Mrs. Rock says nothing as to her own entertaining in these days, but her home was recognized as one of most cordial hospitality, refinement and culture."

Mrs. Rock has distinct recollections of prairie fires here. She says they were beautiful but terrible to behold. They were especially prevalent every fall on the west side, and many a time has she seen the bright flames cover the hills that are now incorporated in the city of Cedar Rapids. Judge Greene had early planted a large orchard at Mound Farm, and once after it had borne fruit for a number of years it was threatened with destruction from a prairie fire. All Cedar Rapids went out to help fight the flames. They saved the orchard at this time, but later the trees were killed by an unusually severe winter.

Mrs. Ellen C. Keeler

This article featuring the daughter of Elizabeth Calder Rock appeared in the Cedar Rapids Gazette on Sunday July 11, 1937.

Cedar Rapids and Mrs. Keeler Observe Their 81st Birthdays

Pioneer Twin Is Personification of Spirit of This City

by Elfie Magnusson

The City of Cedar Rapids and Mrs. Ellen C. Keeler are practically twins. Yesterday was her eighty-first birthday. In the second brick building built in Cedar Rapids, at the corner of A Avenue and Seventh Street NE she was born July 10, 1856. Just two days later the little settlement became a full-fledged city, through approval by the legislature of its proposed charter.

Cedar Rapids' twin might well be called a personification of the spirit of Cedar Rapids. Without sacrificing a modern viewpoint, Mrs. Keeler does not forget the people and the undertakings which gave the little village the impetus to help it grow to today's proportions.

There are few other persons here who can relate so well incidents of the early days, even before her own recollections. These stories contain high adventure, humor, pathos and even sometimes a mystery.

Teacher And Editor

Source of much of Mrs. Keeler's material, aside from her memories of her own life experiences is the life of her mother. Among the most precious of her many heirlooms are the reminiscences written by her mother, who in 1928, shortly before her death, received messages on her one-hundredth birthday from her friends in the four corners of the earth.

Mrs. Keeler's father was R. C. Rock, first hardware merchant to be housed in a brick building, a three story structure he built. Her mother, before her marriage conducted Miss Elizabeth Calder's school for girls, an even older private school than that for boys started by the Rev. Williston Jones, which was the forerunner of Coe College. Miss Calder

was also editor of Cedar Rapids' first newspaper, the Progressive Era, for an interval of several months following the departure of the first editor.

Her charm and humor and unconquerable spirit made her a leader among pioneers. At 85 she wrote her daughter, who was expecting word momentarily of her return from a California visit, that she was on her way to visit Alaska, because "it's probable I'll never find a more convenient time." Calvin Greene and John S. Ely, sons of old and valued friends never failed to call on her on Christmas morning, says Mrs. Keeler.

In 1849 Elizabeth Calder, cultured young teacher, left her home in Cherry Valley N. Y. despite parental objections because of cholera along the road to Dubuque. She was accompanied by a younger brother and sister. She described the journey from Milwaukee after her brother developed symptoms of what they thought might be the dread disease. *(another account goes on to say this brother later served in the Civil War so I assume he survived the illness)* In Dubuque she began the task which had brought her west, preparing the supreme court reports of Judge Greene, a relative *(another article says second cousin)* for publication.

When Judge Greene decided to come to Cedar Rapids the following year, this young "49'er" came also, soon to establish her little school, where she taught French and drawing, and her assistants instructed in piano and "the English branches".

First Literary Society

When we remind ourselves more or less modestly that there's a Midwest culture not to be laughed off or sneered at, we might remember its start here. Early day settlers were not limited to the weekly paper edited by Miss Calder for their current reading, although it might seem a bit stale to us. Mrs. Rock wrote "Being ten days distant from New York and Boston, we planned for subscriptions to several eastern publications which were kept in lively circulation."

She says also, "the piano and guitar which were brought with us contributed greatly to our pleasure." The first literary



Mrs. Ellen C. Keeler is seated on a horsehair covered sofa brought from Pennsylvania in the 1850's when such journeys were made by water to a Mississippi river town. Beside her is part of a silver tea set which belonged to her mother, Mrs. Elizabeth Calder Rock. The bowl was used for the baptismal service of Sampson C. Bever before Grace Episcopal Church had a baptismal font, and since has been the traditional bowl for that use by several generations of the Bever-Blake families. *(the quality of the photo isn't great but the story is too good not to share)*

society was organized the year Mrs. Keeler was born. It was the Alpha, with Miss Kate Taylor as president. She was described as "a Virginian, descendant of the Randolphs, a charming and accomplished woman, and a regular contributor to Harpers's Monthly."

The women met, read and discussed magazine articles. They finally "proposed evening meetings, and inviting the gentlemen to join and organize." The gentlemen evidently approved of this proposal for the group met once a week, in 1857-58.

Mrs. Rock was a charter member of the Ladies Literary club, still active as the oldest similar organization here, and Mrs. Keeler is an original member of the Tourist club, formed of daughters of women belonging to the parent organization.

Neighbors Were Helpful

The few hundred people knew and helped their neighbors, and endured hardships together cheerfully. Mrs. Mary Ware Ely, mother of John S. Ely rode horseback to Marion for the mail, and travelers to and from Dubuque acted

as bank messengers and carried money for their friends. On one occasion Miss Calder brought \$8,000 from Dubuque to the first bank here.

Stores of food ran low in 1851 when high water cut off communications with Mississippi river towns and friends and neighbors divided with one another, until the arrival of the steamer which brought not only the welcome food, but also, it is recorded a hoard of rats.

Shortly after this, Mrs. Keeler's father and another man went to Pittsburgh to represent Cedar Rapids business men in arrangements for building a boat to run between St. Louis and Cedar Rapids. The enterprise was short lived however, for water soon became too low to make regular trips possible.

Pigs Come to Church

Among the stories in Mrs. Rock's reminiscences are several concerning the early churches, an important part of the community life. The dignity of the church service must have been somewhat upset on one occasion when the worshippers, meeting in the second floor of a building in which grain was stored, were joined by a drove of pigs. They'd learned to make their way up the stairs and were not to be daunted until someone attempted to shoo them away, when they made pell-mell for the nearest exit and the story says they escaped unhurt in the plunge.

As an Episcopalian service before there was a baptismal font, a bowl from Mrs. Rock's silver tea service was utilized and several generations of at least one family have used the bowl for that purpose ever since.

Intriguing and tantalizing in its possibilities is the story told by Mrs. Keeler of a family of two brothers and two sisters living only a short distance from her girlhood home. They were cultured and refined and the four lived a quiet life. The two men were handy men for the community, and after their deaths the sisters had no means of support. None of the four ever divulged any hint as to their past, and on one knows from what part of the country they came to Cedar Rapids, or whether they were living under assumed names.

Malaria From Virgin Soil

A tale handed down to Mrs. Keeler is that concerning the Indians who regularly visited the Daniels Brothers store, where they were always treated with great kindness. On their first visit after one brother's death, they inquired for the "big chief." When they were told of his death, they gave a blood curdling wail of sorrow, threw their blankets over their faces, and filed out, never to return.

The neighborly spirit extended of course to helping the sick. Mrs. Rock tells of the "sickness attendant on the 'breaking up' of the virgin soil, which fills the atmosphere with malaria, from which the settlers contract agues or fevers. Mrs. Ely and I, in one afternoon's round of visits on newcomers found but two houses where there were no sick. These ailments, however, were seldom fatal, but had the most distressing pertinacity.

Mrs. Keeler's earliest recollection of the mother, she says, is admiring the picture she made when dressed for afternoon calls, in her ashes of rose dress with flowing sleeves and tight lace under sleeves, a little poke bonnet with curling feathers and wearing jewelry, which Mrs. Keeler still has.

Then Came the War

The first task she remembers being set was that of picking lint to be used in dressing wounds of Civil War soldiers. She recalls sitting on a couch, her little feet straight in front, patiently raveling at bits of linen cloth.

Through many of Mrs. Keeler's treasured possessions are museum pieces, her house is no gloomy museum. Each corner of her long living room has ivory painted bookshelves filled with both new volumes and very old ones. Above her grand piano is one of four cherished paintings, probably more than 150 years old she thinks.

Sons Are Artists

Much of the furniture in the home came from Pennsylvania by water. There's a horsehair covered set, a Chippendale table which was her father's card table, and dining room furniture which belonged to her grandmother.

Most of Mrs. Keeler's eight-one years have been spent here. Her husband, Charles B. Keeler, went to Chicago as counsel for the Milwaukee railway and for the Quaker Oats company. Following his death, she made trips abroad, and then returned to Cedar Rapids. She has two sons, George, named for Judge Greene, lives in Chicago, and has attracted much attention in artistic circles through his work in wrought iron. Charles, copies of whose etchings hang in many Cedar Rapids homes, makes his home in California.

George Greene Keeler



He was known for his metal work and sculpture. It is rumored that while Grant Wood designed the Corn Room and its famous Corn Chandelier now at the Cedar Rapids Art Museum of Art, it may have been George Keeler who actually did the metalwork for the room.

Charles Butler Keeler



As an artist, Keeler was involved with the Torch Press, based in Cedar Rapids. He designed, etched, and printed the frontispiece and title page for the Torch Press' 1915 and 1916 popular Christmas series releases. As the United States entered World War I, Keeler was the company's (339th Field Artillery) translator (fluent in French) and delegate to camouflage school. He attended the Stone City art colony in 1933 and may have shared an ice wagon with Grant Wood.