**Dubuque**

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Dubuque, Iowa, is unique for its cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity. At its chartering in 1837, the city already contained a few dozen religious denominations that worked harmoniously to create city infrastructure. It also had large Irish, Southern, and Eastern European populations, bolstering its diversity. In this paper, I will demonstrate and argue the effect and uniqueness of diversity on Dubuque’s legacy as a city in Iowa.

Dubuque, Iowa, was founded in the early 1830s and chartered in 1837. The city is located on the Mississippi River; historically, sources of water have been a significant draw for societies since the beginning of civilization. The ability of agrarian societies to form around rivers was a major factor in attracting inhabitants. The river was also heavily utilized for travel. The town’s founder, Julien Dubuque, was a French fur trader. Settlements along the Mississippi bolstered the area’s economic appeal. The surrounding terrain was rich in quality timber, allowing for rapid settlement. However, the main purpose of Julien Dubuque’s settlement was to obtain mining rights for the rich lead mines that defined the region for decades. Lead was a valuable resource, as it could be fashioned into ammunition for hunting and warfare. All these factors drew people to Dubuque.

By 1833, Dubuque had become an established settlement that frequently traded with neighboring communities along the river, sending “lead pigs”—essentially lead bars—downriver to St. Louis. By 1856, census records showed that Dubuque County had substantial Irish, German, Polish, and French populations. The Irish community in particular became especially strong, with hundreds of immigrants arriving due to the famine, joining an already established Irish population. Unlike in the East, the larger Dubuque community did not harbor the same biases against the Irish. In an article from the *Dubuque Miner’s Express*, one writer quoted a different publication’s view of the Irish as “incapable of democratic reasoning”—a rationale for pushing them to the periphery. The Dubuque writer countered that this claim was not valid. The Irish community left a significant mark on the city, most notably in “Little Dublin,” the neighborhood historically formed by the Dubuque Irish.

Dubuque also had a small population of freed Africans. It would not have been uncommon in congregational places of worship to see African and white settlers mingling. At one point, Dubuque likely held the largest African population in Iowa. However, this statistic did not hold. The decline of lead mining and a lynching in the 1840s, which resulted in the murder of an African American, pushed many African Americans away. Dubuque also implemented Black Codes that unfairly inhibited African Americans' rights. These codes could enforce slavery through debt peonage and discouraged African Americans from moving to Iowa for decades. Nevertheless, some African Americans remained and established their own spaces. An article in the *Dubuque Herald* detailed the building of a church for African worship, free of mortgages, and called for donations: “The colored people of Dubuque ought not to appeal in vain for a house of worship.”

The city was incredibly diverse religiously—home to Italian and Irish Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Quakers, and Jews. The harmonious relations among these groups allowed the city to thrive. Various Protestant sects jointly funded the first church in Dubuque. The first Congregational Church, built in 1839, was intended as a neutral space for worship. It was funded primarily by John King, proprietor of Iowa’s first newspaper, the *Du Buque Visitor*. Though the church changed hands and experienced financial troubles, it remained a cornerstone of the community.

Catholics also maintained a significant presence. The Jesuit order often traveled along the Mississippi River. Italians, and especially Irish Catholics, were active in Dubuque. Their influence persists today through Loras College, founded by Bishop Mathias Loras to encourage Irish Catholics to move to Dubuque. Though his involvement varied over time, Loras remained active in Catholic affairs in the city.

The Jewish faith was also represented. Alexander Levi, a Jewish man from France, was credited with developing the lead mines from 1833 onward. He was elected justice of the peace in 1846. Jews in Dubuque often achieved prestigious positions, becoming storeowners, lawyers, physicians, and board members. Jewish residents integrated well into Dubuque society. The Jewish community established a temple in 1843, and their ecumenical contributions were embraced by the larger community.

Despite occasional disagreements among denominations, the community achieved much together. Throughout the 1800s, many businesses flourished, and there was a sustained interest in global affairs. Traditionally oppressed groups found space to exist and be acknowledged. One example is a *Miner’s Express* article focused on the city's potential—highlighting good land, opportunities for work, and room for diverse populations to thrive.

The *Miner’s Express*, one of Dubuque’s premier newspapers, even published an entire column praising the newly arrived Hungarian immigrants. The article enthusiastically noted that more Hungarians were immigrating to the U.S., including to Iowa (Sept. 17, 1851). Another regular feature was the “Irish Items” column, which detailed news from Ireland and updates on Irish immigrants in the U.S., compiled from various publications.

Opportunities also existed for women. The *Miner’s Express* frequently reported on girls’ academies that offered education beyond domestic work. The St. Joseph Female Academy accepted girls of any denomination, ensuring that “no influence ever blast their religious principles,” and offered subjects such as astronomy, geography, philosophy, and chemistry. Additionally, a women’s college was founded by an Episcopalian bishop. Although the school faced some enrollment challenges, it remained focused on women’s education and changed hands several times while maintaining that mission.

Since its founding, Dubuque has been a place where marginalized groups could find a foothold—and, if not flourish, at least not be pushed to the margins. Religious minorities found space and acceptance to practice freely. Ethnic minorities established communities and integrated into the broader society. Men and women found access to education. Dubuque’s unique diversity remains a defining feature of its historical legacy.