

A LETTER OF GOV. JOHN CHAMBERS

During four of the eight years of Iowa territorial status the governor was a Whig. He had followed a Democrat and was succeeded by another. When Gen. Wm. Henry Harrison became president in March, 1841, he decided he would appoint as governor of Iowa territory his close friend, John Chambers, a Whig congressman and a distinguished soldier. When the president died less than a month later, his successor John Tyler, found on his desk a memorandum to have a commission made out for General Chambers. President Tyler completed the act of commissioning a new governor for Iowa territory, who came at once to Burlington and took over. The territorial governors were also commissioners of Indian affairs. Therein was involved much political trouble.

In the first volume of the third series of *THE ANNALS OF IOWA*, in July 1894, William Penn Clarke, a close friend of Governor Chambers, contributed a fine article about the governor, including some letters and two portraits. Later the authenticity of the portrait showing him as a young man was called in question and it was agreed the portrait was of another man of same name. A short time ago *THE ANNALS* editor received from Russell F. Moore, of Washington, D. C., a letter written by Governor Chambers, which is printed below. The signature to this letter proves conclusively that the portrait alluded to above, which had a signature appended, was not of the Iowa territorial governor.

That which makes the letter important, however, is the sidelight it throws on the troubled situation incident to handling the Indians in Iowa and restraining the traders. It is well known that Governor Chambers, perhaps more than any other one having to do with the Indian problem in Iowa, made a hard fight to protect the Indians, and quite likely it was because of his fitness for this hard task that President Harrison selected him to come to Iowa. The letter of Governor Chambers follows:

Burlington, Iowa Territory

13th August 1842

(Private)

Sir:

I have the pleasure to acknowledge the receipt of your letters of the 5th and 29th ult. and to thank you very sincerely for the kind and friendly spirit in which they are written. It is entirely congenial to my feelings and has confirmed the impression previously entertained, that on proper occasion I could venture to address myself to Mr. Spencer without a rigid adherence to the formality of official intercourse with the Secretary of War. Under this conviction I shall not hesitate to avail myself whenever it may seem necessary of your invitation to communicate with you fully and freely.

You will see in the *Iowa Territorial Gazette* of this date, of which I enclose you and Mr. Crawford each one, a letter from Major Pilcher purporting to be addressed to me, which proves that in the supposition expressed in your letter of the 29th ult., that the Hon. Mr. Dodge and his correspondent "have become ashamed of the detection and exposure of their maneuvers." You have given them credit for more modesty than they possess. The letter very clearly manifests the spirit of demagogism in which the correspondence between them originated and which I am happy to say has signally failed of its intended effect upon the recent elections in this territory, at which the question of a convention to form a state constitution was submitted to the people, and with all the influence of Mr. Dodge's principal supporters was negated by a majority in every county.

From the date of Major Pilcher's letter I have no doubt it was intended to have been published here before the election, but from some cause did not reach its destination in time. It is not necessary that I should indulge in any commentary upon this production. You will see at a glance that he has in effect abandoned the position that the entire Indian title was extinguished and relies principally upon an interest in common with the Sacs and Foxes, though he reasserts his former opinion and declares it unchanged. You will notice that he boasts that he will "be able to exercise a certain influence in our Indian relations," when you and Mr. Crawford will only be remembered as having been in office. This is perhaps intended to be understood, that he hopes for some political revolution in which he will be re-instated in office, but I fear there is more in it than is expressed or would be inferred by those unacquainted with the fact that there is at St. Louis a number of persons, who from long continued intercourse with the

Indians on the waters of the Missouri and Mississippi, and, having in their employ almost all the influential interpreters, half-breeds, and whites who have intermarried among the Indians, have acquired a control over them by means of which they can and (as I believe) do defeat or promote at their pleasure any object or policy the government may have in view in relation with any of the tribes within the Missouri and Iowa superintendencies. With this set I strongly suspect Major Pilcher has great influence, and shall not be surprised if we feel the effects of it in every effort to treat with the Sacs and Foxes and Winnebagoes, though we may be unable to fix upon them the charge of interfering. This influence can only be overcome by a total change of the system of trade and intercourse with the Indians, as established by existing laws. But upon this subject I need only to refer you (when you have time and inclination to look into it) to my letters in relation to it, to the Commissioners of Indian affairs. You will see that Major Pilcher predicts that the people he had induced by his letters to Mr. Dodge to intrude upon the Indian lands, "will not stand much dragooning," and no one can doubt that his wishes stand godfather to the prediction. It, however, comes too late to affect his object, nor would it have done so, even if it had preceded the process of "dragooning" which he affects to deprecate, it serves therefore only to show that in the malevolence of his heart he wants to excite these people to the commission of treason and involve the country in bloodshed if he could.

If these scriblers will permit me, it is my wish to avoid entering personally into this controversy, because I believe I can more effectually counteract their schemes by not putting it in their power to attribute to me hostility to the increase of population in the territory and to "*the settlers*." As the matter stands I find even this favoured class disposed to apply to me for information and to confide in what I say to them, which they would not do to the same extent, if I should be dragged into a controversy with their would-be exclusive advocates.

I have not received from Mr. Crawford the information relative to the measures taken for the protection of our frontiers, to which you allude in your letter of the 29th ult.

With great respect,

Your obdt. servant,

JOHN CHAMBERS

TO:

Hon. I. C. Spencer,
Washington City.

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