

John Duncombe and Mary "Mollie" Williams were married on May 11, 1859, three months after the diary ended. This is their wedding portrait. Below: The Duncombe home — "Fair Oaks" — in 1871. The house was built of gypsum blocks. Seven children were born to the couple. Two sons edited the *Fort Dodge Chronicle*, established by their father. Daughter Mary married U.S. Senator W. S. Kenyon.



HOUSE PHOTO: COURTESY WEBSTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY (FORT DODGE). PORTRAIT: FROM *A BOOK OF DAYS*, BY WILLIAM SAYLES DOAN (FORT DODGE, 1991), WITH AUTHOR'S PERMISSION.

EPILOGUE

John Duncombe, After the Diary

by Roger B. Natte

I really wonder if I was born to live and die without leaving a name," John Duncombe wrote in his diary in the spring of 1857. "Is it possible that more than one third of my probable life has passed without my doing one single act that will mark my memory, after the present race is dead?"

He need not have worried.

Duncombe became arguably Fort Dodge's most prominent citizen, achieving great success in both public and private realms. His legal training and natural ability brought him respect and recognition as one of Iowa's foremost attorneys. During a period in which the railroads played a powerful role in the state's economic and political life, he was the attorney for the Iowa Division of the Illinois Central for 37 years. He also represented the Mason City & Fort Dodge, the Fort Dodge & Fort Ridgely, the Des Moines & Fort Dodge, and the Cherokee & Dakota Railroads for shorter periods. Between 1881 and 1889 he lectured on railroad law for the University of Iowa's law school. He also served as president of the Iowa Bar Association.


As a member of what at times was a powerless political minority, he nevertheless wielded considerable personal influence. In 1860 he attended the Democratic National Convention as a delegate supporting James Breckenridge, and he chaired the Iowa delegation to the Democratic conventions in 1872 and 1892. He served in the Iowa state legislature for eight years — in the Senate, from 1859 to 1862, and in the House, for 1871–1872 and 1879–1880. He chaired the commission to revise the Iowa Code in 1860, served as a member of the Board of Regents


for the University of Iowa for 18 years, and in 1893 was appointed to the Iowa Commission for the Columbian Exposition (the Chicago World's Fair). In later years, he was chosen as the first president of the Iowa Pioneer Law Makers Association, indicating bipartisan recognition of his leadership.

Duncombe's success carried over into the business world. His early fortune was the result of his success as a land agent and land speculator. The wealth he acquired was immediately invested in other enterprises. An incorporator of the Iowa Falls & Sioux City (Illinois Central), the Mason City & Fort Dodge (Chicago Great Western), and the Fort Dodge & Fort Ridgely (Minneapolis & St. Louis) Railroads, he was the first to invest in coal mining in north central Iowa, finding a ready market with the railroads he was tied to financially. His coal investments later extended to the new fields of Wyoming. Duncombe was also one of the original financiers of the Fort Dodge gypsum industry, organizing in 1889 the Duncombe Stucco Mills and building the fourth mill in the area. One of the first local mill owners to recognize the benefits of consolidation in the industry, he sold his company eventually to the newly formed U.S. Gypsum Company.

The final area in which Duncombe left his mark was in journalism, first as co-owner and co-editor of the *Fort Dodge Sentinel*. He later was the editor of the *Fort Dodge Democrat*, and in later years he established the *Fort Dodge Chronicle* (which eventually merged with the *Fort Dodge Messenger*.)

John Francis Duncombe died in Fort Dodge, Iowa, on August 2, 1902, at the age of 70.

 **Roger B. Natte**, who transcribed the John Duncombe diaries, taught history at Iowa Central Community College for many years and also served on the board of the State Historical Society of Iowa. Natte has been involved in numerous local history projects in Fort Dodge and Webster County and has written many articles and monographs on local history.

 **Bill Silag** is guest associate editor of this issue of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*. As author of the contextual sidebars, he drew upon his historical expertise in early town development in Iowa, the subject of his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Iowa in 1979. A former editor of *The Palimpsest*, Silag has taught history, worked in program evaluation and organizational development, served as managing editor and editor-in-chief of Iowa State University Press, and, most recently, edited *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838–2000*. He is now at work on a history of Des Moines.

NOTE ON SOURCES

The main source of information used in preparing the sidebars was Roger Natte's *Frontier Foundations: Creating an Iowa County* (Fort Dodge: Webster County Historical Society, 2000), which includes discussions of the founding of Webster County, its frontier political institutions, and its county courthouse, along with excerpts from the Duncombe journals. Background material about Fort Dodge political traditions can also be found in Thomas Richard Ross, *Jonathan Prentiss Dolliver: A Study in Political Integrity and Independence* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1958), and Leland L. Sage, *William Boyd Allison: A Study in Practical Politics* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1956).

Jack T. Johnson, "Jesse Williams," *Palimpsest* 21 (June 1940), 184–96, which contains as much information about Bernhart Henn as about Jesse Williams, seems to be the only source available on the careers of these two important Iowa land speculators. Roscoe L. Lokken, *Iowa Public Land Disposal* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1942), and Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789–1837* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), are essential to understanding the context in which entrepreneurs like Henn and Williams operated.

John C. Parish, *George Wallace Jones* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1912), is a standard political biography. A profile of Senator Jones appears also in Franklin T. Oldt et al., eds. *History of Dubuque County, Iowa* (Chicago: Goodspeed Historical Association, [1911?]), 865–66. For information about the Dubuque & Pacific Railroad, and Senator Jones's role in it, see H. Roger Grant, ed., *Iowa Railroads: The Essays of Frank P. Donovan, Jr.* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), especially 102–25. George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815–1860* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1951; repr. New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 345–51, explains the railroad land grants.

Allan G. Bogue, "Iowa Claim Clubs: Symbol and Substance," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45 (June 1958), 231–53, disputes the democratic motivations attributed to club members by previous historians, highlighting instead the clubs'

dubious legality and the extortionist instincts of the membership. County seat wars are a major theme in Jacob A. Swisher, "The Location of County Seats in Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 22 (January, April, July 1924): 89–128, 217–94, 323–62. Webster County's wrestling-match legend is told by Harold Andrews, "Wrestling Match Sealed the Fate of Pioneer Iowa Town," *Des Moines Register*, Nov. 19, 1922. Judge C. J. McFarland's years on the bench are recalled in L. F. Andrews, *Pioneers of Polk County, Iowa, and Reminiscences of the Early Days*, vol. 1 (Des Moines: Baker-Trisler Company, 1908), 449–56.

The material on Governor Carpenter's early career in Fort Dodge is drawn from Mildred Throne, *Cyrus Clay Carpenter and Iowa Politics, 1854–1898* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1974), which also contains an account of the Spirit Lake rescue mission. For a discussion of the events at Spirit Lake in 1857 and their aftermath, see Greg Olson, "Tragedy, Tourism, and the Log Cabin: How Abbie Gardner Sharp and Charlotte Kirchner Butler Preserved and Promoted the Past," *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* 82 (Summer 2001), 56–77.

Leland L. Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974), traces Iowa's political evolution from territorial days through the 1850s with mounting suspense. Morton M. Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War: A Decade of Frontier Politics* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), analyzes key aspects of the Republican ascendancy in Iowa in the 1850s. And James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) is excellent on the national context in the 1850s, especially about Bleeding Kansas (145–69) and the Black Republicans (143–44).

Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 3–13, 87–143, suggests that a man like young John Duncombe was probably not alone among 19th-century American men in his sometimes obsessive quest to find a soul mate. Maj. William Williams, who became John Duncombe's father-in-law in May 1859, looked back on the frontier years in "History of Webster County, Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* (1st series) 7 (July 1869), 286–93

— by Bill Silag