

The
PALIMPSEST
MAY 1941
CONTENTS

John Chambers

JACK T. JOHNSON

The Gentleman from Kentucky 129

Governor of Iowa 144

Personal Memoirs 155

PUBLISHED MONTHLY AT IOWA CITY BY
THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT IOWA CITY IOWA
UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912

THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

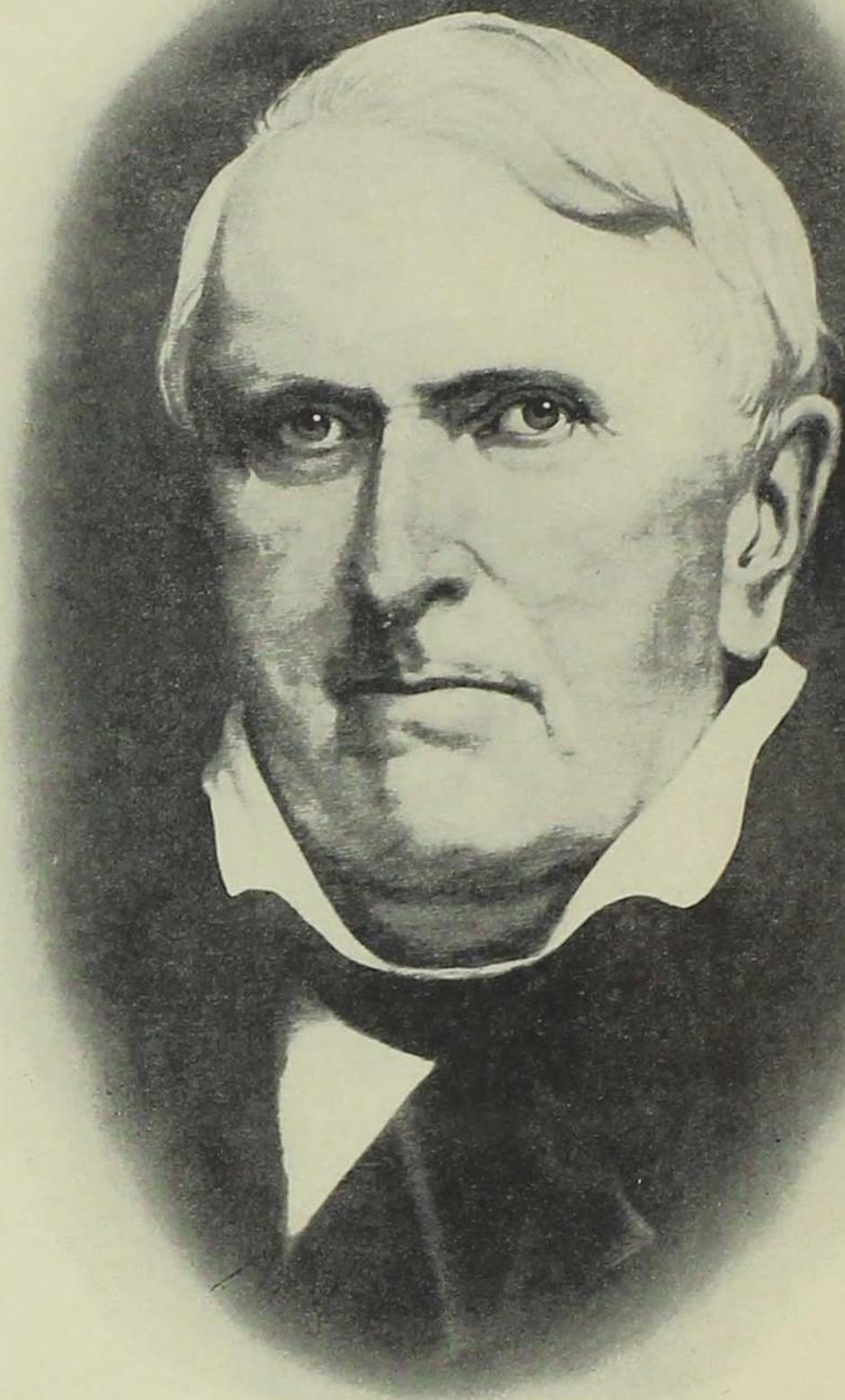
Superintendent

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSESTS

In early times palimpsests were parchments or other materials from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

PRICE—10c per copy: \$1 per year: free to members of Society
ADDRESS—The State Historical Society Iowa City Iowa



JOHN CHAMBERS

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XXII

ISSUED IN MAY 1941

NO. 5

COPYRIGHT 1941 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA



The Gentleman from Kentucky

John Chambers, born in New Jersey and nurtured in Kentucky, was the second Governor of the Territory of Iowa. His life spanned seventy years of the most formative period in the history of the United States and, although he spent less than five years in Iowa, they were also years of foundation laying. They were the awkward years during which Iowa was making the transition from Territory to Statehood. Consequently the administration of John Chambers was a significant phase in the history of Iowa.

The Chambers ancestry fits into a typical pattern of immigration and intermingling. Rowland Chambers with his wife and children migrated to the United States from Ireland in 1720 and located in Pennsylvania. In the Susquehanna Valley a son, James, grew to manhood and married Sarah Lee. Their son, Rowland, went to work in New York for his merchant uncle. About 1768 he married Phoebe Mullican of Long Island.

Meanwhile, he had formed a partnership with an Englishman, John Martin, who owned a farm and mills in Somerset County, New Jersey. There, at Bromley Ridge on the Raritan, the fourth son of Rowland and Phoebe Mullican Chambers was born on October 6, 1780, and christened John.

The aftermath of the War for Independence, his unfortunate business association, and the burning of the mills brought financial ruin to Rowland Chambers. Misfortune and habits of intemperance acquired in the army prevented him from recovering his former well-being. During this time of poverty and discouragement, Rowland's oldest son brought back from Kentucky a glowing account of the frontier. In 1794, when John Chambers was fourteen, his father packed beds, clothing, and provisions in two large wagons and moved West. In Kentucky, the Chambers family settled at the town of Washington.

Soon after their arrival John went to work as a clerk in a general store — employment which was interrupted only by five months spent at Transylvania Seminary in Lexington. In 1797, just after the seventeenth anniversary of his birth, ambitious young Chambers entered the office of Francis Taylor, clerk of the Washington district court, for the purpose of studying law in the library of his preceptor. He must have made a

success of his reading because in November, 1800, he was admitted to the bar. His preparation for the law was very meager indeed, a fact that he regretted all his life.

In 1802 the district and quarter session courts of Kentucky were replaced by a system of circuit courts, and John Chambers became a candidate for the position of clerk of the new court, much to the annoyance of Francis Taylor who had befriended and trained him, and who was also a candidate for the post. Taylor got the job but he never forgave his former protégé.

The animosity aroused over the contest affected the course of Chambers's career. He had hoped to secure a position that would insure a regular income so he could be married for he was at that time engaged to Margaret Taylor, a half-sister of Francis Taylor. In spite of Taylor's opposition and the uncertainties of private law practice they were married on June 16, 1803.

The most significant result of his defeat for the clerkship was the necessity of turning his full attention to the practice of law. Between 1803 and 1805 the records of the Mason County court indicate that Chambers was one of the busiest attorneys. Indeed, for a lawyer under twenty-five it may be said that he experienced remarkable success in the cases he pleaded. But this legal suc-

cess was marred by domestic tragedy. His wife died on March 4, 1807.

Some months later Chambers visited his father-in-law, Ignatius Taylor, at Hagerstown, Maryland. There he became engaged to Hannah Taylor, a half-sister of his first wife. According to his *Autobiography*, the courtship was swift and decisive. Hannah Taylor was being courted by two young swains, both of whom John Chambers thoroughly disliked. Rather than have such a sweet girl waste her life on profligate rakes, he decided to marry her himself. The wedding occurred on October 29, 1807, again with the disapproval of some of the girl's family. Chambers built a home called Cedar Hill near Washington, Kentucky, which remained the hub of his universe for more than a third of a century.

The practice of law was interrupted by two events in 1812. Chambers was chosen to represent Mason County in the Kentucky House of Representatives. At the same time the people of Kentucky were stirred by the outbreak of hostilities with Great Britain, and John Chambers joined General William Henry Harrison as a volunteer aide-de-camp.

Unaccustomed to military life, he nevertheless soon attracted the attention of General Harrison by his methodical actions. Harrison was particu-

larly gratified with the way in which Chambers brought order out of the chaos of his military papers. After the battle of the Thames in which the Americans routed the enemy, Chambers and another staff officer pursued the British Colonel Henry Proctor who deserted his troops and attempted to escape. A dramatic race ensued and finally, just as he was about to be caught, the British commander abandoned his carriage and disappeared. In his report to the War Department, General Harrison mentioned particularly the services of the young Kentuckian. Thereafter, Chambers's friends called him Major, and later in the stress of political campaigns the rank was increased to Colonel.

Following the war, Chambers resumed the practice of law. In 1815 and 1816 he again represented Mason County in the lower house of the Kentucky legislature. Between 1819 and 1823, he served as justice of the peace, and in 1820 he was appointed to the office of Commonwealth Attorney for the first district, a position of honor and importance.

During those years Kentucky experienced an economic collapse as part of the aftermath of the War of 1812. Debtors demanded legislation to relieve their distress. As a consequence the legislature of Kentucky in 1815 approved a statute ex-

tending the time allowed for a stay of judgment from three to twelve months. This action had the effect of tightening the money market and of dividing the State into two political factions — those in favor of the moratorium and those opposed. The difficulties were accentuated by the fact that the Kentucky Court of Appeals declared the statute in violation of the contract clause of the United States Constitution. Immediately, the debtor faction took steps to destroy the court by electing a legislature that would remove the conservative judges. They hoped to establish a new court organization and appoint judges who might reverse the decision. Throughout this dispute Chambers sided with the Old Court Party which defended the unconstitutionality of the stay of judgment legislation.

The faction in favor of a new court managed to elect Joseph Desha as Governor but failed to get a two-thirds majority in both houses of the legislature and so their plan failed. The bitter partisan strife was highlighted by a charge of murder against the Governor's son, Isaac B. Desha. John Chambers participated in the prosecution. Desha was convicted amidst much party feeling but his case had to be retried because of an error in procedure. For three years the case dragged on through innumerable continuances. At last the

culprit was pardoned by his father, but John Chambers had once more come to the attention of the people of Kentucky as a competent attorney.

On May 2, 1828, he was nominated for the position of Congressman made vacant by the resignation of Thomas Metcalfe who was a candidate for the post of Governor. The campaign was successful: both Chambers and Metcalfe were elected. Chambers took his seat in the House of Representatives on December 1, 1828, at the beginning of the short session of the Twentieth Congress. He seems to have enjoyed his first experience in national politics. Though the *Journal* of the House shows that he was not prominent in legislative affairs, the winter in Washington was probably pleasant for he was very active socially. At the end of the session, he once more returned to the private life of a Kentucky lawyer.

In the summer of 1830, however, he was again chosen as a Representative in the Kentucky legislature. During the session he was so interested in the promotion of internal improvements that he was selected as chairman of the Committee on Internal Improvements after his reëlection to the House in 1831. He refused to be a candidate for the legislature in 1832 and also rejected an offer of appointment to the Court of Appeals.

On November 11, 1832, his wife, Hannah Tay-

lor Chambers, died. Their twenty-five years of married life had been happy ones. And after his wife's death, John Chambers showered his affection upon his ten children.

Governor J. T. Morehead in February, 1835, appointed Chambers to the Kentucky Court of Appeals as a recognition of his high standing in the legal profession. Poor health compelled him to resign in March, however, before he had taken his seat on the bench. Though he seemed able-bodied, he was never robust and in his later years suffered from a chronic chest ailment. To overcome his failing health, he decided to undertake the rigors and exercise of a Congressional campaign. Beginning in April, 1835, he traveled about the district, made many speeches, and enjoyed the active life that campaigning imposed. Chambers seems to have been a popular favorite for in August he polled 3155 votes while his Democratic opponent received only 1365.

John Chambers was not a conspicuous Representative during the one extra and four regular sessions in which he served with the Whig minority. He was an active and honest member of the Committee on Claims. Besides that, however, he seems merely to have represented his State's interests, while opposing the financial program of Jackson and his followers.

When the Twenty-fifth Congress adjourned in March, 1839, Chambers returned to his home in Washington, Kentucky. There he hoped to resume his practice of law, and as an avocation he became interested in the current Kentucky fad of silk culture. But he did not long escape from the political arena.

In December, 1839, William Henry Harrison was nominated as the Whig candidate for President. John Chambers, during 1840, assumed the pleasant task of supporting Old Tippecanoe. He made speeches in Kentucky and Ohio and was the Whig leader in his home district. Perhaps the Kentuckian played a significant rôle in Harrison's victory.

Harrison did not forget Chambers. He invited the sixty-year-old Kentuckian to accompany him to Washington for the inauguration, and during the hectic weeks of February, 1841, he served as the President's personal confidant, unofficial secretary, and political adviser. Before Harrison's tenure came to its tragic end in April, the President prevailed upon Chambers to accept an appointment as Governor of the Territory of Iowa.

John Chambers received his commission on March 25, 1841. On May 12th, he arrived in the Territory, and on the following day, assumed the duties of his office. He brought none of his

family with him, being accompanied only by his private secretary, J. O. Phister, and the Secretary of the Territory, O. H. W. Stull. The new Governor was a man of experience and mature judgment. His dignified mien and scrupulous personal appearance pleased the citizens of Iowa. Socially, he was courteous, kindly, and genial. The Governor selected Burlington rather than Iowa City for his home.

John Chambers began his administration surrounded by a Democratic majority and when the Fourth Legislative Assembly convened in Butler's Capitol at Iowa City on December 6, 1841, both Houses of the legislature were Democratic. In his first message the Whig Governor recommended that the legislators concern themselves with measures relative to Statehood, a system of education, and the financing of the penitentiary and the capitol building. None of these questions was partisan and so the legislative session ended on February 18, 1842, without serious political friction. This was no doubt largely due to the tact and experience of the Governor.

Between March and May, 1842, Chambers went back to Kentucky for a visit. When he returned he brought his sons, Joseph (and his wife), John, and Henry. With the idea of remaining permanently in Iowa, the Governor built a frame

dwelling west of Burlington. Because of the large number of grouse in the vicinity, he called his home "Grouseland". This place was soon the center of neighborhood conviviality.

During the Fifth Legislative Assembly the Governor once more emphasized his interest in education, the improvement of the Mississippi River for navigation, and the promotion of Statehood. An interesting veto illustrates the Chief Executive's moral attitude and his view of governmental organization. He refused to sign a bill granting divorces to nineteen couples, because he believed that it was "safer and more consistent with the principles of governmental organization" to provide for divorce by court action. But the Assembly passed the measure over his veto.

As in the earlier sessions the main issue presented to the Sixth Legislative Assembly was the question of Statehood. This was an object which the Governor had consistently advocated, though his party was opposed to it. In April, 1844, the question of calling a Constitutional Convention was finally decided in the affirmative and the delegates who met in the Capitol at Iowa City in October framed an organic law. A change of boundaries stipulated by Congress prevented it from being accepted after admission to the Union had been granted.

Other problems which confronted Chambers were those relating to the Iowa-Missouri boundary dispute and Indian affairs. It was the Chief Executive's view that the boundary question was one for Federal and not Territorial authorities to settle. As Superintendent of Indian Affairs, the Governor was concerned with the peaceful adjustment of disputes with the red men over annuities, and by able management he negotiated a treaty which permitted white men to occupy the central portion of Iowa.

In March, 1845, James K. Polk became President of the United States, and it was expected that Chambers would be removed from his position. Throughout the summer, however, the Governor received no word of his removal. In August, 1845, the people of Iowa once more voted on the question of Statehood and once more the Constitution of 1844 was rejected. James Clarke, prominent Burlington editor and one of the leading Democrats in the Territory, was finally appointed Governor and took office in November, 1845.

The desire of John Chambers to spend his last years in Iowa was not fulfilled. He had never been able to attract more than four or five of his children to the Territory, and those who did come returned to Kentucky, probably because of sick-

ness. Just before Clarke took office Chambers himself went back to Kentucky on account of ill health. His political life was at an end. Wise in the ways of government, he had administered the Territory of Iowa in the years of its infancy and had taken it a long way toward Statehood.

In February, 1846, Chambers wrote to William Penn Clarke: "If I live and have strength enough, I shall return to Iowa in the spring. I cannot be contented here — the very sight of the negroes annoys me." He was soon back in Iowa at his Grouseland home.

During the summer of 1846 Governor Clarke paid Chambers a rare tribute. He asked the ex-Governor to command the Iowa troops raised for the Mexican War, but poor health compelled Chambers to decline the offer. He had lost ninety pounds in weight, but not his interest in politics. He opposed the Iowa Constitution of 1846 (drafted in May) because of the elective judiciary and the article prohibiting banking corporations. After it went into effect he was anxious to have the Whigs win as many State offices as possible.

Sometime in the following winter, ill health caused Chambers to return to Kentucky. Once there he decided to remain and to build a new home near Maysville. There he lived quietly, finding happiness in frequent visits with his chil-

dren. As always his letters to them were filled with advice and affection.

In the fall of 1849, friends in Washington, D. C., prevailed upon the old Kentuckian to go to Mendota at the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers to negotiate a treaty of cession with the Sioux Indians. This mission Chambers accepted. Perhaps it was fortunate that a call to public duty came just then because it helped relieve his grief over the death of his two daughters, Mary and Laura. Both had died of cholera within half an hour on September 2nd, and were buried in the same grave. Although the trip was a tedious one, the ex-Governor was glad of the diversion. An interesting event of the journey occurred at Ripley, Ohio, where he visited Francis Taylor who fifty-two years before had made Chambers his deputy clerk and later had reluctantly become his brother-in-law. At Mendota the old Kentuckian and Governor Alexander Ramsey met two thousand Indians but their negotiations were of little avail.

Sickness continued to assess its toll. During the summer of 1851, he was urged to run for the State Senate but declined. By the following winter his health was very poor and he decided to live at a small tavern in Washington, Kentucky. There, at the request of his son, Henry, he wrote

the reminiscences of his life. In March, 1852, he moved to Paris, Kentucky, with his daughter Matilda. That fall his body, which had withstood so much pain and distress, met its final shock. John Chambers died on September 21, 1852. Perhaps his epitaph was best expressed by an Iowa contemporary who said that he was "a sterling, sturdy, fresh-complexioned, honest gentleman from Kentucky."

JACK T. JOHNSON

Governor of Iowa

In December, 1839, the National Convention of the Whig Party nominated William Henry Harrison for the Presidency of the United States. This selection was an attempt to weld the various factions opposed to the administration of Martin Van Buren. It was particularly pleasing to John Chambers who at the age of fifty-nine was planning to retire from public life and spend his remaining years at home in Kentucky. Chambers, who had refused renomination as a candidate for Congress, immediately took the stump for "Tippecanoe". Throughout the year 1840, he was an active campaigner for his old military chief and Harrison's victory gave him great satisfaction.

President Harrison was not one to forget the services of his friends and he was especially grateful for the aid of John Chambers in the military campaign of 1813 and the political campaign of 1840. It was not surprising, therefore, that Chambers was invited to accompany the President-elect to Washington for the inaugural ceremonies. The presidential party arrived in Washington on the morning of February 9, 1841.

During the time preceding the inauguration on

the fourth of March, Harrison prepared his inaugural address. To be sure that no political mistakes would be made a copy was submitted to Daniel Webster for revision. While discussing some suggested changes, it appears that John Chambers and Webster engaged in a heated controversy. This dispute may have had some bearing upon a story later circulated by the Democratic Party in the Territory of Iowa.

Close friendship with the President motivated John Chambers to stay at Washington during the first trying weeks. While awaiting the arrival of William Taylor (Harrison's son-in-law), who was to become the President's private secretary, Chambers unofficially acted in that capacity. This post naturally subjected him to considerable political pressure and made him more desirous than ever of retiring to private life. President Harrison, however, was anxious to appoint his old friend to some official position, partly as a partisan reward and partly for the benefit of having a loyal assistant.

The President tendered Chambers the post of United States Treasurer, but the offer was declined. Following this refusal the position as Governor and Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Territory of Iowa was proffered. Though Chambers declined this office also, he was later

persuaded to accept the post. "The General (now President)", explained Chambers in his *Autobiography*, "avowed to his cabinet his wish to induce me to remain at Washington, and he charged them to designate some office for me which would induce me to do so. The Office of Treasurer was designated as the least laborious & best paid of any other. I declined it, and he became evidently anxious & uneasy on the subject, and when I determined to return home, he told me it would have a most singular appearance if I did not take office under his administration that, it was universally expected and if I refused it, it would render my friends who were also his, unfriendly towards him. I told him I could easily obviate that by causing it to be published as upon my authority, that my private affairs had induced me to decline office, but this did not seem to satisfy him, and I at last told him I would accept the office of Govr. of Iowa, which he had proposed and I had previously refused, but I told him it was probable that I should retain that office but a short time. I was appointed the same day, but urged by some of the cabinet not to accept, but to agree to remain which it was urged was essential to the Presidents happiness, as his heart seemed to be set upon having me near him, but I had upon very mature reflection come to the conclusion that

the personal friend & confident of a President was by no means so enviable a position as was generally supposed, and that the very reputation of occupying it was the certain means of creating unceasing & inveterate vituperation & slander."

Ben Perley Poore in his *Reminiscences* cast an interesting sidelight upon the appointment of Chambers. It seems that Harrison's Cabinet members thought they had the right to review presidential appointments. According to this famous Washington correspondent, Secretary of State Daniel Webster asked President Harrison to appoint General James Wilson of New Hampshire to the Governorship of Iowa. But the Chief Executive told Webster he had already persuaded Chambers to accept.

"The next day", related Poore, "Colonel Chambers had occasion to visit the Department of State, and Mr. Webster asked him if the President had offered to appoint him Governor of Iowa. 'Yes, sir,' was the reply. 'Well, sir,' said Mr. Webster, with sour sternness, a cloud gathering on his massive brow, while his unfathomable eyes glowed with anger, 'you must not take that position, for I have promised it to my friend, General Wilson.' Colonel Chambers, who had been a member of Congress, and was older than Mr. Webster, was not intimidated, but replied, 'Mr.

Webster, I shall accept the place and I tell you, sir, not to undertake to dragoon me!' He then left the room, and not long afterward Mr. Webster received from the President a peremptory order to commission John Chambers, of Kentucky, as Governor of the Territory of Iowa, which was complied with."

The hesitancy with which John Chambers accepted the Iowa Governorship started rumors circulating in the Territory. The position was a lucrative one. At least two Iowans, Philip Viele and Joseph Hawkins, wanted the office, and Whig political leaders were grooming their own favorites. The most talked-of candidate for the Iowa Governorship besides Chambers and Wilson was Orlando Brown, an editor of Frankfort, Kentucky, sponsored by Attorney General John Crittenden.

The Burlington *Territorial Gazette*, Democratic in politics, was particularly alert to rumored political machination concerning Chambers's appointment. The newspaper version of the dispute between Webster and Chambers was that the Cabinet officers had promoted the interests of General Wilson and had attempted to side-track Chambers with offers of other posts. Moreover, it was alleged that Chambers regarded these substitute places "as of an inferior character", and was said to have told the Cabinet "he would see

them d—d" before he would accept any such appointment.

Another press story related that Webster had insisted that his friend General Wilson should go to Iowa, whereupon Old Tippecanoe replied that Webster might "go to the devil". The candidacy of Orlando Brown was supported by another Cabinet member, who was probably not too grievously disappointed when his friend Chambers accepted the position. On March 25, 1841, President Harrison officially commissioned John Chambers Governor of the Territory of Iowa.

Two days after receiving his commission John Chambers learned that the President had been seized with a chill. On the morning of April 4th, President William Henry Harrison lost his fight with pneumonia. At the President's bedside during his last hour was the newly-appointed Governor of Iowa. After lingering a few days at the capital, Chambers, accompanied by O. H. W. Stull, the Secretary of Iowa Territory, returned to his Kentucky home to prepare for his trip to Iowa.

On May 3, 1841, Governor Chambers left Maysville, Kentucky, for his position in Iowa. Two days later at Cincinnati he took the oath of office before John McLean, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. At

Louisville the steamboat again stopped and Chambers purchased two new dresses to send home to his daughters Mary and Laura. From there the Governor proceeded to St. Louis and thence up the Mississippi. It was on the afternoon of May 12, 1841, that the steamboat approached the landing at Burlington.

The citizens of Burlington had planned to meet the Governor's steamboat soon after it passed Fort Madison. Indeed, they had chartered the ferryboat *Shockoquon* but, owing to the extremely short notice of the Governor's arrival, the plan had to be abandoned. Nevertheless, his boat was awaited by an enthusiastic crowd at the Burlington landing. After the formalities of introduction, James W. Grimes welcomed the new Governor for the people of the Territory.

Mr. Grimes said that he welcomed Governor Chambers for the citizens "with heartfelt satisfaction". The appointment was highly agreeable to the people of the Territory because of Chambers's military record, his former public service, and his distinguished merit. "In you," said Grimes to Chambers, "they recognize one of the pioneers of the West — a veteran legislator of the chivalrous State of Kentucky — a leader in our national councils — and one of our country's champions in the second war of independence

with Great Britain — but above all they rejoice to behold in you one who enjoyed the unbounded confidence of our late venerated Chief Magistrate, and who aided him in the greatest perils of his eventful life.”

After again paying tribute to President Harrison, Grimes concluded his remarks with these words of welcome: “We bid you welcome to the smiling prairies of Iowa; we welcome you to the hospitalities of our city, and to the warm affections of a generous and noble hearted people. . . . We welcome you as our adopted fellow citizen, and as the Executive head of our Territory. And believe me, it is our ardent prayer, that He who rules the destinies of nations may so ordain that your administration of our government may prove alike prosperous to the community, and honorable to yourself.”

As reported in the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* for May 20, 1841, the silver-haired man of sixty listened to this enthusiastic welcome and then made a judicious reply. Chambers said that “in the acceptance of the Executive office of the Territory he intended to identify himself with its interests and prosperity — to make it his future home, and the home of his family — that all his hopes of earthly happiness were henceforth to depend upon the means which this Territory would afford him

of promoting it." The new Governor paid his respects to the pioneers and to the settlers of the prairies who, he hoped, would not be misled by political partisanship and prejudice. He concluded by expressing the wish that he might soon become acquainted with most of the citizens of the Territory.

Following this ceremony, a procession was formed and Chambers was then escorted to the National House. Bringing up the rear of the procession was James G. Edwards, the Whig editor of Burlington, and "a small troop of the Gov's negroes."

Robert Lucas, the first Governor of the Territory, was in Iowa City when Chambers arrived at Burlington. He had left directions, however, to deliver the official seals "with all the appendages" in case the new Governor arrived during his absence. On May 13, 1841, John Chambers presented his credentials and assumed the duties of Governor of the Territory of Iowa.

Thereupon occurred an episode which might have precipitated some bitterness between Lucas and Chambers. Chambers did not write to Lucas of his arrival, nor did Lucas receive due notice of his own removal from Washington until June 17th. Governor Lucas, experienced in public office and scrupulously proper, wrote to the Secre-

tary of State expressing his surprise at such a lack of governmental efficiency. He was astonished that Chambers did not bring him notice of dismissal and had neglected to report when he took office. "I do not mention these facts", wrote Lucas, "by way of complaint, but from their novelty; as I believe such proceedings, are unprecedented, in the annals of our Government." This official oversight may have been another instance of the antagonism between Webster and Chambers over the latter's appointment.

It was over a month after his arrival at Burlington before Governor Chambers visited the capital of the Territory. Meanwhile, Governor Lucas had returned to Burlington and acknowledged the revocation of his commission. As soon as the new Governor reached Iowa City two or three hundred citizens marched to the National Hotel to welcome the Chief Executive. Dr. Jesse Bowen tendered the respects of the community and invited the Governor to a public dinner. Chambers made a few remarks but refused the invitation to dinner out of respect to President Harrison.

Governor Chambers did not like the location of Iowa City. He found the inland town inconvenient and almost without mail service. Though the meeting place of the next Legislative Assem-

bly had been fixed at Iowa City, he decided to establish his residence at Burlington and go to the capital only for official business. Indeed, the executive offices of the Territory remained at Burlington as long as Chambers was Governor. Six miles west of Burlington he found a spot to his liking and bought land there. On December 27, 1841, Chambers wrote to his friend John J. Crittenden, "I have bought a farm near Burlington and hope to be able to secure two or three thousand acres of fine land within half a days journey of it, for my four youngest children, so that my destiny is fixed. I am to be an Iowa farmer for the remnant of my life."

As he began his official duties in Iowa, Chambers expressed a characteristic sentiment. "I long", he said, "for the quiet of private life and shall embrace it at the first moment I can do so without an apparent wilful desertion of a part of some difficulty."

JACK T. JOHNSON

Personal Memoirs

In 1908 the State Historical Society of Iowa published the *Autobiography of John Chambers*, supplemented with his "Family Record", a genealogical summary of the Chambers family. The personal reminiscence had been prepared by Iowa's second Territorial Governor and had for more than half a century remained in the possession of the family of his son, Henry Chambers of Louisville, Kentucky. After correspondence and a visit to Louisville, Professor Benjamin F. Shambaugh obtained permission to publish the document. John C. Parish, who was then writing a biography of Governor Chambers, edited the manuscript of the autobiography.

The original manuscript consisted of thirty-three pages eight by ten inches in dimensions, written closely in the characteristically legible handwriting of John Chambers. He, himself, lamented the unsatisfactory composition of the document. "It has been one of the troubles of my whole life", he confessed in a letter of January 26, 1852, "that I never could attain a style in writing, with which I was satisfied and I never wrote anything and laid it aside for a short time,

[in] which I did not find much to correct in the style & language when I came back to examine it again."

Mr. Chambers undertook the writing of his autobiography at the request of his youngest son. Henry Chambers asked his father on November 27, 1851, to outline his family history because he often "had occasion to regret" his ignorance of his "family and near connections". In reply, Governor Chambers on December 2, 1851, wrote: "And as that which is to be done ought always to be done promptly, especially with persons of my advanced age and unstable health, I proceed to comply with your request, promising that there is very little in our family history to distinguish it from the history of thousands of other families in this country."

Three days later on December 5th, Governor Chambers wrote his son that he had begun the autobiography. "For some days past I have spent an hour or two in preparing the sketch of family History which you request in your last letter, but as I soon tire of writing it progresses slowly — I am pleased however that you made the request as neither of your brothers seem to have ever felt or expressed any interest in the subject. It will at last be a mere outline without interest to any person out of the family, when I get through

I will send it to you." He then added a postscript: "I am reduced to writing with a steel pen and would as soon dig potatoes with a negroe mall." The trying task was completed by the following January 12th.

The autobiography was written at a small tavern in Washington, Kentucky, where Chambers had gone to stay through the winter of 1851-1852. In February, he moved to the home of his daughter. By summer he had contracted the fatal illness of which he died on September 21, 1852.

With remarkable memory for a man over seventy years of age the ex-Governor of Iowa traced his reminiscences. His ancestors, of the Cameron clan, had refused to participate in the Scotch rebellion of 1645 and took refuge in Ireland. There they assumed the name of Chambers. Rapidly the Governor sketched the course of events — the coming of his grandfather to America, business enterprises of various relatives, participation in the War for Independence, and finally the migration of his parents from New Jersey to Kentucky when he was fourteen years old.

Governor Chambers emphasized a fact that disturbed him all his life — his neglected education. His experience as a clerk and his preparation for the law were presented as interesting episodes. With pathetic fidelity he described his courtship,

marriage, and sudden death of his first wife, Margaret Taylor. He then, with naive simplicity, recorded the circumstances surrounding his marriage to Hannah Taylor, his first wife's half-sister.

What must have remained most vivid in his memory, however, was his participation in the War of 1812 and his association with General William H. Harrison, because these events were retold in considerable detail. Having told his brief military experience, Chambers described his entrance into politics, his service in the State legislature and in Congress, his general unwillingness to accept public office, and the culmination of his partisan enthusiasm in the campaign for General Harrison in 1840. The concluding pages of the *Autobiography* were devoted to his account of accepting the position of Governor of the Territory of Iowa and to the compilation of genealogical items.

"Old men", concluded Chambers, "who have spent much of their time in public life or the pursuit of popularity and office, are generally considered when they retire from such pursuits from the necessity indicated by age and some times by disease, as disposed to condemn their own pursuits & censure those who are pursuing the course they have abandoned. Such is not exactly my course. I would not however with my experience

pursue the same course if I had my life to live over. It leads to the neglect of some of the duties which a man owes to his family, of much more importance to him & them and perhaps to the Country than any services which he can render to the Republic, without indeed he happens to be one of those rare individuals of whom an age produces only a few".

All his life John Chambers had tried to avoid public office, yet he was not one to shirk his duties as a citizen. He had observed that the rewards were seldom commensurate with the sacrifice. "I am unable at present", he wrote at the end of his career, "to call to recollection an instance in which a clever man of ordinary or even a little more than ordinary capacity, beloved by his acquaintances, and to use the appropriate term popular, has either benefitted himself or his family in a life devoted to *the public service*, and it almost makes me shudder to look back upon the numerous instances that have come under my observation, in which such men and others much more distinguished, have left, or have yet to leave ruined families — ruined in fortune, ruined in their morals, degraded in their habits and course of life — the only reward of life devoted to the public service by their fathers."

Years of experience in public and private rela-

tions, on the frontier and in the national capital, as a soldier and a lawyer, had convinced the old Kentucky gentleman that two evils were particularly prevalent. "One is the effect of imputed talents in particular individuals of numerous families, from which every ass of a whole generation claims distinction. The other is the arrogance of poor stupid wretches who found their claims for notice, if not for distinction, upon the wealth of some ancestor or relation, or perhaps worse, upon the accidental possession of it in their own persons."

This autobiography, which illuminates the life of John Chambers, ended with a set of moral precepts for his son. "I have yet to see wealth pass by descent beyond the third generation," he warned, "but I have seen & see every day the second generation who have squandered the labours of their predecessors or are squandering it, in miserable low degrading dissipation, or more disgraceful gambings with the most degraded of the black-leg tribe, with whom they would not lock arms in the street & yet shut themselves up with them night after night & day after day, permitting their pockets to be picked by them. I pray God to guard my descendants against evil habits, but especially against drunkenness & gambling."

JACK T. JOHNSON

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Established by the Pioneers in 1857
Located at Iowa City Iowa

PUBLICATIONS OF THE SOCIETY

The Quarterly Journal of History
The Palimpsest—A monthly magazine
The Public Archives Series
The Iowa Biographical Series
The Iowa Economic History Series
The Iowa Social History Series
The Iowa Applied History Series
The Iowa Chronicles of the World War
The Miscellaneous Publications
The Bulletins of Information

MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the State Historical Society may be secured through election by the Board of Curators. The annual dues are \$3.00. Members may be enrolled as Life Members upon the payment of \$50.00.

Address all Communications to

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Iowa City Iowa