

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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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