

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