

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## George W. Matsell

All sorts of people have invested in Iowa land. In the early days most of the claims were purchased by settlers, though there were many avowed speculators and some honest promoters. Among the men who bought land in the new State of Iowa was George W. Matsell who, for a generation or more, was one of the leading characters in New York City and a person who, on account of his large acquaintance and the position he held, influenced many people to locate in Iowa.

His father was George Matsell who emigrated to America from England in 1784. After a short time he returned to England, married Elizabeth Constable, and returned with his wife to New York. On October 25, 1806, George W. Matsell was born in New York City. He attended the public schools, was employed for a while in a dye house on Long Island, and worked in a book store on Pearl Street.

At an early age he became interested in politics, and having affiliated with Tammany he occupied many public offices, especially in connection with the police department. When the noted banker and sugar manufacturer, W. F. Havemeyer, was elected mayor he appointed Matsell Chief of Police in 1845, in which capacity he served until 1857, a most trying period in the history of New York City. He was instrumental in quelling the Astor riots and other disturbances. During his régime he made the New York police system one of the most efficient in the United States. He also edited and published a journal devoted to the improvement of police methods and the establishment of a system of coöperation for the apprehension of criminals and the better enforcement of the laws. In July, 1862, when he was spending a summer in Iowa and was no longer connected with the New York police, the authorities telegraphed for their former chief and provided a special train in order that he might return post-haste and stop the draft riots which the military officials had failed to do. As late as 1872, when W. F. Havemeyer was again elected mayor of New York City on a reform ticket, he persuaded his former Chief of Police, then sixty-six years of age, to undertake the reorganization of the police system along the lines laid down when the two men were in office together years before.

The biography of George W. Matsell would be a history of politics in New York City for more than a

generation. He became a leader in the Tammany organization, and was for many years a close associate of Samuel J. Tilden. Remarkable as it may seem, he was also a member of the Committee of Seventy which brought about the conviction of W. M. Tweed and his gang of ringsters.

This story of Chief Matsell, however, should relate to his life and that of his family in Iowa, and not to what he did in New York. The records of Linn County show that George W. Matsell obtained land in Iowa as early as April 12, 1853. At one time he and his family owned three thousand acres, lying north of the Wapsipinicon River, near Viola. Nearly all of it was obtained prior to 1862.

The question of how Mr. Matsell became interested in Iowa has often been asked and has been variously answered. Irving P. Bowdish, an old neighbor, states that Mr. Matsell once told him that he became acquainted with a Jesuit priest, who directed him to invest in Iowa lands because nothing would enhance in value like the lands of the newly developed State where people were rushing in, obtaining government warrants, and establishing homesteads. Moreover, he had always wished to obtain an estate such as the English people retire to when they give up business, and for that reason he invested in this Iowa real estate.

Another story related by the old settlers and also by members of the family is to the effect that a party of Indians who had been on a mission to Washington

stopped in New York City on their way home and were placed in a small, stifling hotel room on a hot summer night. This did not appeal to the Indians. The heat was so unbearable that they were unable to sleep, so they took their blankets and sought the night breezes on the roof of the hotel, much to the annoyance of the hotel proprietor who notified the police department. Chief Matsell heard the Indians' version and at once dismissed the charge of disturbing the peace. Later he showed the tribesmen the interesting sights of the city, and they in turn invited the Big Chief to their wigwams in Iowa, where they insisted that the air was cool and refreshing and where they would show him good hunting and provide him with venison, hominy, and corn on the cob, a delicacy unknown to the New Yorker. This, Matsell used to relate to the members of his family, was the first time his attention had been called to Iowa and he seriously began to consider investing in the virgin soil which lay unclaimed west of the Mississippi River.

Another reason for investing in Iowa land may have been that he was tiring of politics, that he had a family to provide for, and that he longed to retire to some landed estate according to the English custom. The idea of possessing a country residence seems to have influenced his selection of a tract, for if he had intended to use his land merely for farming he could have purchased prairie land at the same price.

George W. Matsell was married in 1834 to Ellen Barrett, the daughter of a dye maker on Long Island and the descendant of an old colonial family, well known during Revolutionary times. Their children were named George W. Matsell, Jr., Harry C. Matsell, Augustus Barrett Matsell, and Susan Jones Matsell. All were well educated and highly cultured. Strict discipline was maintained at home, and the children were taught the art of being well bred. They were devout Episcopalians and attended the Episcopal church services regularly.

George E. Finn relates that his father, Matthew D. Finn, a nephew of Matsell, accompanied the Chief on his first trip to Iowa early in the spring of 1856, and used to tell how they crossed the Mississippi on a ferry at Davenport amid ice floes and made their way to the farm by way of Wilton Junction, when there were no roads and scarcely any settlers along the way. They located the land which had been previously purchased and found a number of Indian tepees near the Sweet Water Spring, so called by the Indians, where Matsell began to erect the first buildings with the assistance of Mr. Finn who was a carpenter. These buildings were completed between 1856 and 1862 and are still standing, now unpainted and more or less dilapidated. When first erected, however, they constituted one of the show places in the State.

The house, built to accommodate visitors as well as the members of the family, consisted of twenty-five

rooms. There was also a road house erected for the use of the hired help who were not quartered in the big house. The other buildings consisted of cow barns, horse barns, corn-cribs, an ice house, an office building, a summer house, and even a theater, called Oak Hall Theater, where a number of plays were produced by actors of note who were invited to spend their vacations on this estate. A small printing office was also erected and a paper, *The Wapsie Ranger*, was published and circulated among friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. A large wine cellar, built of solid native stone, was well stored with vintages of all ages. Many a bottle of fine imported wine was opened when visitors from the East came for rest or recreation. A boat house was also erected by the river, where boating during the summer was one of the joys of the visitors from afar.

As soon as the buildings were completed, members of the family remained on the farm, though Mr. and Mrs. Matsell and their daughter spent only the summers in Iowa. Much money was expended in attempting to build up a typical old English estate. Trappers and hunters were prevented from trespassing. It was a decidedly picturesque place with plenty of timber and a running spring of fine, cool water. Now and then the Indians would come and linger for weeks at a time in the timber along the river. They were always welcome visitors. In a conversation with the old Indian chief at the Tama Reservation many years ago he began to tell the

writer about his hunting and fishing trips along the streams in eastern Iowa. He did not seem to have any idea of county boundaries, but he knew the names of the streams and mentioned the Iowa, the Cedar, Indian Creek, the Big Slough, the Wapsie, and the Buffalo rivers. He also mentioned the Matsell place, saying, "Heap big man. Good man. He not cut down trees and plow land. He let it lay. He good friend of Indian." Thus, after a period of nearly half a century, the name of the elder Matsell was still remembered. He must have left a vivid impression upon the mind of the Red Man.

"In the fall of 1858, while a student at Cornell College," says Milo P. Smith of Cedar Rapids, a former judge of the District Court, "I drove a New York visitor from Mount Vernon to the Matsell place. This man was interested in farms and seemed to know who were the owners of land and who were tenants by the manner in which the places were kept up. Near the top of the watershed toward the Wapsie, we stopped to take an inventory of the surroundings. The woods were painted in all the gorgeous dyes of autumn. There was a sullen repose on the hills across the slowly flowing river. It was the haze of the Indian summer, which I was familiar with, but a scene entirely new to the eastern visitor, and the effect of this scenery on him also took hold of me. We heard the creaking of an ox cart and the rattling of an empty wagon in the far distance, but this did not in the least disturb the spell of the land-

scape. The prairie chickens whirred past, the turtle doves cooed in their melancholy way, millions of blackbirds swarmed by, and we remained as if entranced by the magic of the scene. The stranger felt as if he were transferred to world of make believe.

“When we arrived at the Matsell house, we found it filled with skins of various kinds, with paintings, armor, swords, guns, rifles, saddles, bridles, fishing rods, and everything that a young man would want. The boys were out hunting in the timber. Far in the distance the deep barking of the hounds could be heard. At that time I would have forsaken my books and slate and would have given up my future course in life for that of a trapper and hunter, provided I could have joined the Matsell boys in their glory amid the hills and glens of the classic Wapsie. It was a wonderful scene and left a deep impression on me — one which I have never forgotten.”

J. W. Bowdish, a member of the Finance Committee of the State Board of Education, relates that his father, Bailey Bowdish, emigrated from New York with his family in 1854, and two years later located on some land near the Matsell place. As he had a large family and was unable to get his house finished for want of carpenters, Mr. Matsell sent his own carpenters over to complete his neighbor's home, saying, “They need a house more than I do.”

Mr. Bowdish visited the Matsells many times and recalls that the house was filled with books, furni-

ture, paintings, china, upholstered settees and lounges, magnificent silver service, and drinking glasses such as he had never seen before in any other home in the West. He also relates that he and his brother one day accompanied R. D. Stephens with his aged father, a citizen of western New York, to spend a day with George W. Matsell. After walking about among the trees and enjoying the scenery, they were invited to the house. Following a short rest, Mr. Matsell said to his son George, "We have visitors from a distance to-day. I want my choicest. Bring it up." George obeyed and returned with some wine. With extreme courtesy the guests were invited to partake, but the elder Stephens declined to take the glass offered him.

Then, in a most impressive manner, Chief Matsell turned to him and said in substance, "Sir, you should not refuse this offering. Permit me to explain my pressure upon you to partake and your corresponding duty. I know your motives are of the highest and I doubt not your patriotism. I could not seek to turn you from what you believe are motives of right or question your loyalty. The substance in your glass was taken from a British man-of-war by an American vessel in a naval engagement during the War of 1812. I offer this to my guests only on rare occasions, for the wine is rare that I present to you. I offer it only to those of your high character and intense love of country—in brief, my choice friends in whom I have faith. This

is an opportunity of rare occurrence. Your patriotism calls upon you to partake in honor and in commemoration of your country's victory. As an expression of your patriotism, I invite you to drink." The earnest appeal touched the elder Stephens and slowly he raised the glass to his lips.

C. F. Butler of Springville relates that in company with his father, Joseph Butler, he was a frequent visitor in the Matsell home and was on friendly and intimate terms with the boys. He remembers particularly the immense stature of father Matsell, who must have weighed three hundred pounds. He always rode in the back seat of a carriage built especially for his use. In the early days the Big Woods south of the Wapsie was infested with horse thieves and outlaws, but when G. W. Matsell began to spend much of his time in that vicinity they removed to a safer region.

"Many years ago," relates Judge F. O. Ellison of Anamosa, "I took my family and a few friends up the Wapsie in a launch. On our return we were entertained royally by the Matsells. The meal was most elaborate. We were served with food which could only be obtained in the larger cities, and the table was supplied with the choicest wines. The serving was perfect and the gracious manner of Susie Matsell made a lasting impression on me. The furniture was exquisite, the buildings were unique, and the method of operating the farm was far different from what we were accustomed to in the West."

After the death of Mr. Matsell on July 25, 1877, the family all remained in Iowa, where the mother died in 1897. The children never married. Rumor had it that Susan was engaged to a well known New York gentleman who was strongly attached to her, but she felt that her duty was to her mother and brothers first. There was, so gossip states, a long struggle between love for the young man and duty to her family. Duty won. The family never disclosed to strangers the name of the man who loved her. She was especially attached to her brother George, who was an associate of Theodore Roosevelt and a friend of Grover Cleveland.

When Susan died some nine years ago, George took her remains to the old Trinity Cemetery in New York City, and on that long, cold, winter journey in December, 1915, he caught a severe cold and followed her to the grave within a few weeks. Only one of the family still lives. Augustus B. Matsell, now in his eighty-fourth year, is making his home with a relative, George E. Finn, on the old Finn homestead near the Matsell place. Anton Meyer now owns most of the old Matsell estate.

George W. Matsell was an imposing personality, one who possessed the ability of a born leader of men. At one time he was rated as being very wealthy, but his means were partially dissipated in the ups and downs of New York politics. For a time he financed the police department largely out of his own resources. Probably he lost some money

during a flurry on the New York Stock Exchange. These financial difficulties, however, did not in any way alter his mode of living or his genial disposition.

He loved Iowa and its broad acres, and used to tell his friends and associates that nowhere in America could he feel more free and content than in Iowa, where the grass looked a little greener, where the birds sang so cheerfully, and where the air was most bracing. Had he devoted as much time to his Iowa investments and to local politics as he did to his native city and State, he might have become an important figure in Iowa political history. True, he was a Democrat of the old school and a close associate of such leaders of the party in his native State as Horatio Seymour, Samuel J. Tilden, and Martin Van Buren. He was a man admired by the masses, and in this new country he could have exerted a powerful influence.

Though George W. Matsell did not devote all his energy to his interests in Iowa, he did show many others the way. His long and strenuous life is an index to the force of his character and a measure of his ability. He stood for whatever seemed best for the individual and the community, and his example was an inspiration to friends and neighbors.

B. L. WICK