

Governor Chambers' First Annual Message

John Chambers, the second governor of the Territory of Iowa, served that Territory for half of its period of existence — from 1841 to 1845. These were important formative years when the Territory was moving slowly toward statehood. His administration, therefore, was a highly significant one in Iowa history.

Of Scotch-Irish ancestry, Chambers was born at Bromley Bridge, Somerset County, New Jersey, on October 6, 1780. He migrated with his parents to Mason County, Kentucky, at the age of fourteen. After five months at Transylvania Seminary in Lexington, Chambers began the study of law and was admitted to the Kentucky bar in 1800. He was an able and successful lawyer but a failure as a manufacturer.

In 1803 John Chambers married Margaret Taylor, who died three years later. In 1807 he married Hannah Taylor, a half-sister of his first wife. Their twenty-five years of married life were happy ones, ending only with Hannah's death in 1832. Thereafter John Chambers showered his affection upon his ten children.

During the War of 1812 Chambers served on

the staff of General William Henry Harrison, who greatly admired his efficiency and organizing genius. Chambers vigorously supported Harrison in the famous "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" campaign of 1840. For this loyal support President Harrison commissioned John Chambers as Governor of the Territory of Iowa on March 25, 1841. At least two Iowans, Philip Viele and Joseph Hawkins, had sought the position. In addition, Daniel Webster wanted it for his friend, General James Wilson of New Hampshire, and sternly advised Chambers not to accept the post. Finally, after having refused it, and the more lucrative office of United States Treasurer, Chambers agreed to accept the Governorship, but not until President Harrison had told Daniel Webster he might "go to the Devil" with his candidate.

Chambers was sixty years old when he arrived in the Territory on May 12, 1841. For two score years he had gained rich experiences while serving several terms in the lower house of the Kentucky legislature as well as in the halls of Congress in Washington, D. C. 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. A socially courteous and genial man, Chambers' dignified mien and scrupulous personal appearance pleased the citizens of Iowa.

Chambers was met by an enthusiastic crowd

when his steamboat docked at Burlington. Once the formalities of introduction were over, James W. Grimes welcomed the new Governor for the people of the Territory. After praising his military record, his former public service, and his leadership in Kentucky and national affairs, Grimes concluded:

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. . . . it is our 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.

Governor John Chambers' First Annual Message was read before the Fourth Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Iowa in the Butler Capitol at Iowa City on December 8, 1841. After congratulating the Legislative Assembly on the health of the people, the rapidly increasing population, and the productivity of the land, the Governor recommended:

Vote of People on Statehood

of paramount importance, is the legislation necessary to the ascertainment of the wishes of the people of the Territory, touching our admission into the Union of the States.

Progress of Construction on New Capitol

Assembling . . . at the established seat of government, where the erection of a very important part of the public buildings is in progress, you will be enabled to satisfy yourself by a personal inspection, whether the execution

of the work and its advancement towards completion, is such as the means put at the disposal of the superintendent, authorized you to expect.

Penitentiary at Fort Madison

I would recommend an earnest appeal to Congress for such an appropriation as will enable us speedily to complete a work so necessary to prevent this Territory from becoming the refuge of a large portion of the most corrupt and vicious population of the States.

Reason for Failure to Obtain Indian Cession

But it is probable that for a long time we shall remain subject to the evils and inconveniences of having an Indian population on our borders — evils and inconveniences resulting principally from their excessive and growing fondness for intoxicating drink, with which they are supplied by a depraved and vicious portion of our citizens, who, defying alike the laws of morality and of their country, furnish them the means of degradation and destruction, with a full knowledge and perfect disregard of its murderous effects upon them. . . . Humanity shudders and religion weeps over the cruel and unrelenting destruction of a people so interesting, by means so dastardly and brutal, that the use of the rifle and the sword, even in a time of profound peace with them, would be comparatively merciful. . . . I would, therefore, recommend such an amendment of the existing law on the subject, as will add imprisonment to the existing penalty, and will strictly prohibit all white persons from purchasing any articles of property from an Indian, without the written permission of the Agent appointed by the Government to take care of them. . . .

Conscientious Objectors

I would recommend that provision be made for such

cases, leaving them subject in time of war to pay an equivalent for personal service.

Delay in Organization of Township Schools

The subject is one upon which no delay or neglect in any department of the government, or on the part of any persons concerned in the administration of the laws for its regulations, ought to be tolerated.

Navigation of Mississippi Above Rapids

I recommend a respectful, but earnest appeal to Congress in behalf of your constituents, for such an appropriation for the removal of the obstructions (Des Moines and Rock Island Rapids) as will effectually protect the commerce of the Upper Mississippi against the losses and impositions to which it is now subject. . . .

Southern Boundary of Iowa

I have recently received a letter from the Governor of Missouri, on the subject of the boundary between that State and this Territory, in which he proposes submission of the matter in controversy to the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States, upon a statement of facts, in the nature of an agreed case, which letter, with a copy of my answer to it, is herewith submitted for your consideration.

Strict Economy in Expenditures

The excess of expenditures in former years, over and above the appropriations made by Congress for the support of the Territorial Government . . . admonishes us of the necessity of strict economy in the administration of the fund put at our disposal by the General Government.

Such was the content of Governor John Chambers' First Annual Message in Butler's Capitol. The following year work on the new capitol had progressed far enough to allow his Second Annual

Message to be read to the Fifth Legislative Assembly which occupied the first four rooms that had been finished since the spring of 1842.

Meanwhile Chambers, not liking Iowa City, chose Burlington as his Executive headquarters whenever the Legislative Assembly was not in session. He built his home on the outskirts of Burlington and called it "Grouseland" because of the large number of grouse in the neighborhood. Chambers loved the free soil of Iowa and wanted to spend his last years here. To William Penn Clarke he wrote in 1846: "If I live and have strength enough, I shall return to Iowa in the spring. I cannot be content 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 James Clarke offered Chambers the command of Iowa troops raised for the Mexican War but poor health compelled him to decline the offer. He opposed the Constitution of 1846 and continued to support Whig principles and candidates.

Unfortunately, he never was able to attract more than four or five of his children to Iowa. In 1847, ill in health, he returned to Kentucky where he 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."

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN