

**Annals of Iowa**  
July, 1871

**GOVERNOR CHAMBERS.**

JOHN CHAMBERS, the second governor of Iowa territory, was born on the 6th day of October, 1780, at Bromley Bridge, Somerset county, New Jersey. His father, Rowland Chambers, was born in Pennsylvania, of Irish parentage. According to a tradition in the family, their remote ancestors were Scotch, and belonged to the clan Cameron. Having refused to join in the rebellion of 1645, they migrated to Ireland, where, by an act of parliament, on their own petition, they took the names of Chambers. Rowland Chambers espoused with enthusiasm the cause of American independence, and was commissioned a colonel of New Jersey militia. From exposure he soon became disabled by rheumatism, but, on partially recovering, again devoted himself to the cause, freely appropriating the products of his farm to the use of the army, and expending his means without stint. At the close of the war, reduced in circumstances, he immigrated to Kentucky and settled in Washington, then the county seat of Mason county,

John Chambers, the youngest of seven children, was then fourteen years old. A few days after the family settled in their new home he found employment in a dry goods store, and the following spring was sent to Transylvania Seminary, at Lexington, Kentucky, where he remained for less than a year, and returned to his home. Two years later he entered a new field of labor, destined, under providence, to exercise a controlling influence upon his after life. Francis Taylor, Esq., a practicing lawyer of the Mason county bar, was elected, about this time, to the clerkship of the district court, and in the fall of 1797 Mr. Chambers became his deputy. The duties of the office at that time being light, and the law library of his employer at hand, he devoted himself to the study of law, a profession for which Mr. Taylor thought him peculiarly adapted.

In the spring of 1800, Mr. Taylor being anxious to remove to his farm, some miles distant, offered him the emoluments of the office for his services, which he accepted. In November, 1800, Mr. Chambers was licensed to practice law. His training in the clerk's office, his strict business habits, and his general acquaintance throughout the country, made him a promising aspirant for professional success, which he speedily achieved, continuing his studies with the same diligence that characterized his period of preparation for the bar.

In 1803, Mr. Chambers, who had now entered upon a career of uninterrupted professional prosperity, was married to Miss Margaret Taylor, of Hagerstown, Maryland, a sister of the gentleman in whose office he had studied law, and daughter of Major Ignatius Taylor, of the revolutionary army (Maryland line). She lived but about three years, and in 1807 he married Miss Hannah Taylor, a sister of his first wife. Not long afterward, his practice having proved remunerative, he embarked in the manufacture of bale rope and bagging for the southern market. In this he incurred heavy losses, recovering, however, by energy and prudence, without loss of credit.

When, in 1812, the United States deemed it essential to the national honor to declare war against Great Britain, there was great excitement in Kentucky, and men of capacity and character were demanded for the public service. Mr. Chambers was chosen to represent his County in the legislature, and would have been returned at the next session, but declined. The war had begun, and General William Henry Harrison, then governor of Indiana, was invited by the authorities of Kentucky to take command of her troops, then being organized to defend Ohio

from the forays of the British, aided by their savage allies. After the defeat of Winchester, Governor Shelby, who had volunteered to lead the Kentucky troops in person, offered Mr. Chambers a place on his staff, to which he was compelled to decline, having previously promised General Harrison to accept a position on his staff, to which he had been recommended by officers of the regular army who knew him. Being summoned by the general to the front, he joined him about the 1st of September, at Camp Seneca, on Sandusky river, and was announced next morning, in general orders, as aid-de-camp to the commander-in-chief, with the rank of major. He remained with General Harrison until the close of the campaign, rendering efficient service in the battle of the Thames, for which he received a letter of thanks from the general, and honorable mention in his dispatches to the secretary of war—especially for gallant conduct in the pursuit of the British General Proctor, who, in the language of the dispatch, "only escaped by the fleetness of his horses," one of which, a grey Canadian of great power, fell to the lot of Major Chambers, and died, many years after, on his Kentucky farm, in the peaceful service of his captor.

In 1815 Mr. Chambers was again elected to represent his county in the state legislature (lower house), his brother, James Chambers, being elected, at the same time, to the state senate from the same county. The pressure of professional engagements, and the care of a growing family, deterred him from again entering political life until, 1828, when the selection of General Thomas Metcalfe as the whig candidate for governor of Kentucky caused a vacancy in the congressional representation of the district, and Mr. Chambers was nominated to fill the vacancy. He was elected, and served out the unexpired term of Governor Metcalfe, but refused to be a candidate for re-election.

From 1830 to 1832 he was again called by his fellow-citizens to serve them in the state legislature. The credit of the state was at a low ebb. Stay laws and relief laws had done their worst. It was necessary, by proper legislation, to redeem the commonwealth from the reproach brought on her by these embarrassments. A bill was introduced by Mr. Chambers, the effect of which was to greatly increase the revenue tax of the state. He knew it to be absolutely essential to the honor and prosperity of the state. The question how this measure would affect his popularity at home did not belong to his political catechism. He went into office untrammelled, and was ready to meet his constituents, and stand or fall by his record. He advocated the measure, it passed, and was subsequently called, by his political opponents, "Chambers's Tax Bill." At the first county court after his return from the state capital he was violently assailed by those who had opposed his election, about his oppressive tax bill. Their clamor was unheeded until the business of the court was over. Coming out in the evening upon the public square, where, according to the custom of the country, hundreds of men were assembled, he inquired who his assailants were. Two persons in the crowd soon responded. He listened patiently to their harangues, and asked, "Who else complains of excessive taxation?" There being no reply, he said, in a tone which was distinctly heard by the whole crowd: "I am proud, fellow-citizens, of this silent approbation of my course. Only two of you have complained, and they, I presume, cannot be in earnest, since, to my certain knowledge, neither of them has paid so much as a poll tax on his worthless head for five years." The writer of this sketch was present, and heard the hearty cheers which welcomed the rebuke and endorsed the public servant who had acquitted himself with honor by doing what the exigencies of the commonwealth required. We have given this anecdote because it is eminently characteristic of the man. He esteemed the approbation of his own conscience a far higher reward than popular applause.

In 1832 Mr. Chambers was offered a seat on the bench of the supreme court of

Kentucky, but declined it. Again, in 1835, he was nominated by the governor to the senate for the same office, and confirmed, but was obliged to resign before he had taken his seat, in order to restore, by a more active life, his health, which had become seriously impaired.

In 1832 he had suffered the loss of his wife. She was a lady of cultivated mind and elegant manners, and had made his house a happy and attractive home.

In 1835 he was again elected to represent his district in the congress of the United States. He was re-elected in 1837 and served until the close of the 25th congress, in March, 1839. Of the part he took in congress, it is only necessary to say here that it made reputation for him in a district where the standard of intelligence was as high as in any other in the state. And it is a sufficient compliment to his ability and industry as a legislator to say that he succeeded the Hon. Elisha Whittlesey (so long and favorably known in that position) as chairman of the committee on claims, one of the most laborious and responsible positions in the national legislature.

General Simon Kenton, the celebrated pioneer and Indian fighter, having become infirm and poor, had, by the advice of his friends, applied to congress for a pension; but as his claim did not come under any general law, his repeated applications failed, and the brave old man had despaired. Learning that Mr. Chambers, whom he had known well as a neighbor in Kentucky, was in congress, he took heart again, and renewed his application for a pension. Mr. Chambers, whose sympathy was at once thoroughly enlisted, introduced a bill for that purpose, and urged its passage in a speech. He drew a thrilling picture of the veteran woodsman's daring career in his country's service, and described the penury and neglect into which he had fallen in his old age. The appeal was heard with profound interest. The nation's law-makers were for the first time aroused to a sense of justice toward this remarkable man, and the bill was passed by an overwhelming vote.

The writer of this sketch was present when General Kenton presented himself at the law office of Mr. Chambers, having walked all the way from his home on Mad river, in Ohio, to thank his friend. He was neatly clad, his white hair streaming over his shoulders, and his countenance wearing an expression of unwonted complacency and comfort. As he straightened himself up to his full six feet two inches to receive the cordial greeting extended to him, he said, with tremulous voice: "John Chambers, you gave me shelter when I had no home, money from your purse when I was penniless, and now you have---" Here the old man broke down without even reaching the subject of the pension, and brushed away the tears that filled his eyes; while Mr. Chambers said, cheerfully, as he led him to a seat: "Come, general, you are too old now to make a set speech. I understand and appreciate your feelings, and am glad to see you looking so well. I reflect on no incident of my life with more pleasure than my successful appeal in behalf of a public servant who deserves well of his country."

Between 1815 and 1828, Mr. Chambers held for several years the office of commonwealth's attorney for the judicial district in which he lived. He was, during that period, at the zenith of his reputation as a lawyer and

advocate. He met the giants of the Kentucky bar in important civil and criminal trials. He contested with such men as Rowan and Hardin and Barry for the honors of the profession, and if success be the measure of ability, he had no reason to be ashamed of his record. His well known high sense of honor, and his contempt for professional chicanery, commanded the respect of his legal compeers. His appearance and manner were dignified, his tone calm and impressive, and his language singularly direct and vigorous. The impression he made on a jury was not easily counteracted, and his efforts were attended with remarkable success.

Mr. Chambers closed his congressional career in 1839, with the purpose of resuming the practice of law, but his old friend, General Harrison, was announced by the whig party for the presidential campaign of 1840. Mr. Chambers was one of a few of the general's companions in arms who could give authoritative denial to the infamous slanders, circulated by his political enemies. Accordingly, at the general's earnest request, he consented to attend him throughout that memorable canvass, and in many a stirring speech, before immense throngs of people, presented the claims of his old commander. When inauguration day approached, a private letter from the president-elect summoned him to North Bend, whence he accompanied him to Washington, where he remained until the arrival of the president's private secretary, whose duties he had temporarily performed.

While in Washington, Mr. Chambers was urged by President Harrison to accept some office requiring his residence there. This he declined, but afterwards accepted the appointment of governor of Iowa. On the 13th of May, 1841, he entered upon the duties of his office. His success in his administration of the affairs of the territory was well attested by the approbation of the people, and by the hearty commendation of those in authority at Washington, especially for his management of Indian affairs. During his term of office he found it necessary, on several occasions, to suppress the intestinal feuds of the red men, which he did with such firmness and decision that quiet was promptly restored where war seemed imminent. Governor Chambers was repeatedly called on to treat with the Indian tribes for the purchase of their lands. In October, 1841, he was commissioned jointly with the Hon. T. Hartley Crawford, commissioner of Indian affairs, and Governor Doty, of Wisconsin, to hold a treaty with the Sacs and Foxes, which, however, did not result in a purchase. In September, 1842, being appointed sole commissioner for the same purpose, he succeeded fully in carrying out the wishes of the government. In 1843 he held a treaty with the Winnebagoes, but in this instance no result was reached.

In 1844, his term of office having expired, he was re-appointed by President Tyler, but was removed, in 1845, by President Polk, to make room for Governor Clark, whose political faith (unlike Governor Chambers's) was in accord with that of the president. Shortly afterward, with greatly impaired health, he returned to Kentucky, where, with skillful medical treatment and entire relief from official cares, he partially recovered.

During the few remaining years of his life, Governor Chambers's recollections of Iowa were of the most agreeable character. He spoke gratefully of the reception extended to him by her people, and often referred with great kindness to his neighbors in Des Moines county. Indeed, there were many pleasant circumstances attending his residence there. He was much interested in the improvement of his beautiful farm, six miles west of Burlington. His social and official relations were all harmonious. The responsibilities of his office he, of course, could not divide, but its labors were greatly lightened by the systematic industry and intelligence of his private secretary, Mr. J. O. Phister, a native of Maysville, Kentucky, who remained with the governor during his entire residence in Iowa, and enjoyed his confidence and friendship then and ever afterwards.

Governor Chambers's infirm health forbade his engaging in any regular employment after his return to Kentucky, but in 1849, at the solicitation of the commissioner of Indian affairs, he negotiated, jointly with Governor Ramsey, of Minnesota, a successful treaty with the Sioux Indians for the purchase of lands.

The latter years of Governor Chambers's life were spent mostly with his children, whose affection and respect were the chief conditions of his happiness. During a visit to his daughters,

in Paris, Kentucky, he was taken sick at the house of his son-in-law, C. S. Brent, Esq., and, after a few weeks, breathed his last on the 21st day of September, 1852, in his seventy-second year.

Governor Chambers's private career was marked by a generosity which was limited only by his means, and was, in fact, the predominant trait in his character. His house and his purse were alike open to every worthy claimant of his bounty. He seemed utterly incapable of any sordid motive. His benevolence gave rise to many pleasant incidents, recalling acts which he had forgotten. On one occasion his family discovered that he wore a handsome diamond breast-pin in addition to the less costly one he usually wore. On inquiry they found that he was unconscious of the fact, and was at a loss to account for it; but, on reflection, he remembered that a young gentleman had, a few hours before, pretended to examine closely the breast-pin he was wearing, and next day charged him with the surreptitious present. The reply was: "Yes, sir. I knew your aversion to accepting presents, and therefore did not venture to tender this formally. Years ago you performed valuable legal services for my father, and refused compensation, because you knew he was in straitened circumstances. But you will not refuse to wear this to remind you of my father, and of the gratitude of his son." On another occasion, in traveling through the far west, he found a namesake at an humble farm-house where he had stopped for the night. In answer to a question, the boy's mother said he was named for a lawyer in Kentucky who had helped her family when they were in trouble. She was wholly unconscious that her guest was the identical Kentucky lawyer of whom she spoke.

Governor Chambers furnished a beautiful example of filial love and duty. As early as his fifteenth year he was partly charged with the care of his mother, a woman of high character and strong intellect, whom he fondly loved, and to whose comfort and happiness he devoted himself with untiring assiduity throughout her long life. He was a man of iron will, and somewhat stern in his bearing, but always ready to unbend at the call of hospitality, and always ready to mingle cheerfully in the family circle.

Although often before the people, he was never defeated in a popular election; yet he never descended to any of the arts of demagoguery to secure popularity.

It has not been deemed necessary to include here an extended account of Governor Chambers's official connection with Iowa territory. The desire has been warmly expressed by some of his contemporaries to know more of his early life, and to have his portrait placed in this work. To gratify these old friends this brief sketch was written, and to them (not to the critical public) the writer respectfully presents it.