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John Duncombe, After the Diary

Roger B. Natte

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John Duncombe and Mary “Mollie” Williams were married on May 11, 1859, three months after the diary ended. This is their wedding portrait. Below: The Duncombe home — “Fair Oaks” — in 1871. The house was built of gypsum blocks. Seven children were born to the couple. Two sons edited the Fort Dodge Chronicle, established by their father. Daughter Mary married U.S. Senator W. S. Kenyon.
I really wonder if I was born to live and die without leaving a name,” John Duncombe wrote in his diary in the spring of 1857. “Is it possible that more than one third of my probable life has passed without my doing one single act that will mark my memory, after the present race is dead?”

He need not have worried.

Duncombe became arguably Fort Dodge's most prominent citizen, achieving great success in both public and private realms. His legal training and natural ability brought him respect and recognition as one of Iowa's foremost attorneys. During a period in which the railroads played a powerful role in the state's economic and political life, he was the attorney for the Iowa Division of the Illinois Central for 37 years. He also represented the Mason City & Fort Dodge, the Fort Dodge & Fort Ridgely, the Des Moines & Fort Dodge, and the Cherokee & Dakota Railroads for shorter periods. Between 1881 and 1889 he lectured on railroad law for the University of Iowa's law school. He also served as president of the Iowa Bar Association.

As a member of what at times was a powerless political minority, he nevertheless wielded considerable personal influence. In 1860 he attended the Democratic National Convention as a delegate supporting James Breckenridge, and he chaired the Iowa delegation to the Democratic conventions in 1872 and 1892. He served in the Iowa state legislature for eight years — in the Senate, from 1859 to 1862, and in the House, for 1871-1872 and 1879-1880. He chaired the commission to revise the Iowa Code in 1860, served as a member of the Board of Regents for the University of Iowa for 18 years, and in 1893 was appointed to the Iowa Commission for the Columbian Exposition (the Chicago World’s Fair). In later years, he was chosen as the first president of the Iowa Pioneer Law Makers Association, indicating bipartisan recognition of his leadership.

Duncombe’s success carried over into the business world. His early fortune was the result of his success as a land agent and land speculator. The wealth he acquired was immediately invested in other enterprises. An incorporator of the Iowa Falls & Sioux City (Illinois Central), the Mason City & Fort Dodge (Chicago Great Western), and the Fort Dodge & Fort Ridgely (Minneapolis & St. Louis) Railroads, he was the first to invest in coal mining in north central Iowa, finding a ready market with the railroads he was tied to financially. His coal investments later extended to the new fields of Wyoming. Duncombe was also one of the original financiers of the Fort Dodge gypsum industry, organizing in 1889 the Duncombe Stucco Mills and building the fourth mill in the area. One of the first local mill owners to recognize the benefits of consolidation in the industry, he sold his company eventually to the newly formed U.S. Gypsum Company.

The final area in which Duncombe left his mark was in journalism, first as co-owner and co-editor of the Fort Dodge Sentinel. He later was the editor of the Fort Dodge Democrat, and in later years he established the Fort Dodge Chronicle (which eventually merged with the Fort Dodge Messenger.)

John Francis Duncombe died in Fort Dodge, Iowa, on August 2, 1902, at the age of 70.
Roger B. Natte, who transcribed the John Duncombe diaries, taught history at Iowa Central Community College for many years and also served on the board of the State Historical Society of Iowa. Natte has been involved in numerous local history projects in Fort Dodge and Webster County and has written many articles and monographs on local history.

Bill Silag is guest associate editor of this issue of Iowa Heritage Illustrated. As author of the contextual sidebars, he drew upon his historical expertise in early town development in Iowa, the subject of his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Iowa in 1979. A former editor of The Palimpsest, Silag has taught history, worked in program evaluation and organizational development, served as managing editor and editor-in-chief of Iowa State University Press, and, most recently, edited Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838-2000. He is now at work on a history of Des Moines.

NOTE ON SOURCES

The main source of information used in preparing the sidebars was Roger Natte’s Frontier Foundations: Creating an Iowa County (Fort Dodge: Webster County Historical Society, 2000), which includes discussions of the founding of Webster County, its frontier political institutions, and its county courthouse, along with excerpts from the Duncombe journals. Background material about Fort Dodge political traditions can also be found in Thomas Richard Ross, Jonathan Prentiss Dolliver: A Study in Political Integrity and Independence (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1958), and Leland L. Sage, William Boyd Allison: A Study in Practical Politics (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1956).

Jack T. Johnson, “Jesse Williams,” Palimpsest 21 (June 1940), 184–96, which contains as much information about Bernhart Henn as about Jesse Williams, seems to be the only source available on the careers of these two important Iowa land speculators. Roscoe L. Lokken, Iowa Public Land Disposal (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1942), and Malcolm J. Rohrbough, The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789–1837 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), are essential to understanding the context in which entrepreneurs like Henn and Williams operated.


— by Bill Silag