

Biography of

George Washington Chapman (1812-1881)

George Washington Chapman was, without doubt, descended from Ralph Chapman, born in England in 1615, and who at the age of 20 years, being then a resident of the Parish of St. Saviors, Southwark, County Surrey, emigrated to America, as will appear from consulting the list of passengers who passed from the port of London for the year ending at Christmas, 1635. Upon his arrival in America he probably settled at Duxbury, Mass., although no mention is made of him until 1640. Ten years afterward he became a resident of Marshfield, Mass., and lived there until the time of his death, which occurred in the autumn of 1671. He had a daughter Mary, who married, in 1666, William Troop. This name, though variously spelled, occurs in the family of George W. Chapman many times. His Great-grandfather Throop, when he was a boy, he well remembered seeing. This ancestor, at the age of 91, rode on horseback from Reedsborough, Vt., to Belchertown, Mass., to visit his relatives. George, although very young at the time of this visit, took much pleasure and interest in the old gentleman, and years afterward related to his children many amusing incidents of the early life of his ancient progenitor. Throop Chapman had a number of children, among them William, who in turn, had among others, Daniel, the father of George, who was born Dec. 23, 1782, and died at Canton, Mass., April 12, 1867. He married May 25, 1809, Nancy Smith, who was born in Walpole, Mass., Jan. 9, 1790, and died March 9, 1838. Their second son, George, the subject of this memoir, was born at Belchertown, Hampshire Co., Mass., Nov. 15, 1812.

Mr. Chapman passed his youth in his native town, where, at a very early age, he learned from his father the trade of wheelwright, and soon became a skillful workman, obtaining that practical information which enabled him in after years to apply his naturally mechanical mind so successfully, and devise and invent many improvements in the implements and machinery which he employed in his chosen vocation. In early manhood he engaged in the construction of railroads, and a greater portion of his ever active and busy life was passed in this manner, sometimes as a superintendent, sometimes as a contractor, and, indeed, almost every position required in building railroads has, at one time or another, been filled by him. Nearly every State east of the Mississippi and north of the Potomac bear the imprints of his handiwork. His first experience in building railroads was during the year 1835, when he was at work on the Boston & Providence road, near Canton, Mass. In the year 1836 he went to Philadelphia, Penn., where, at this time, his cousin, Mr. William Otis, invented the steam excavator (since so generally and successfully used for the construction of railroads and canals, and in deepening rivers and harbors, one or more having been used on the Saginaw river, for years). Mr. Chapman superintended the entire construction of the first excavator, and with his own hands built the wood-work. The first attempt to work it was between Baltimore and Washington, on what is now part of the Baltimore & Ohio railroad. Several weeks were spent in a vain attempt to make the excavator work. At length Mr. Chapman persuaded his cousin to permit him to attach what has since been known as "the arms;" the first trial was satisfactory, and from that time the excavator was a success. While engaged in the construction of the Washington & Baltimore branch of the Baltimore & Ohio railroad, he made a brief visit to his native State, and was married Nov. 3, 1836, to Miss Abigail J. Whipple, who was born in Pelham, Mass., Jan. 26, 1815. She was the daughter of Mr. Joseph Whipple, a well-to-do farmer, and a near relative of Commodore Abraham Whipple, of Revolutionary fame. Early in 1837 Mr. Chapman was employed at New Worcester, Mass.; subsequently he took contracts on the Eastern railroad at

Chelsea, near Lynn, Mass. His next employment was upon the Boston Albany railroad, at Richmond, near Pittsfield, and at the Summit cut in Washington tp., Berkshire Co., Mass.

In the autumn of 1841, in company with his younger brother, Wellington, he traveled through Ohio and Michigan, and while stopping at Owosso, Mich., the brothers were induced by A. L. and B. O. Williams to visit the "Big Rock Reservation," riding on horseback through the forest along the banks of the beautiful Shiawassee river; they at length came upon the cleared fields of the Indian reservation, and were so charmed with the location that they both concluded to purchase lands here. George chose the northern portion of sec. 21, on the east side of the river, and his brother directly opposite; this was the first sale of land by the Government in the tp. of Chesaning, then constituting a part of the tp. of Taymouth, which included all the southern portion of Saginaw county. Mr. Chapman's farm was a favorite resort of the aborigines. Nearly all the flats or bottom lands had for years been planted with corn by the Indians, and on the dry, sandy upland may still be seen some of the holes where they buried their winter store. On the upper side of the flats, and near the river bank, was a large burying-ground, and near by a thrifty orchard of apple-trees, supposed at date of purchase to be about 80 years old. Tradition relates that these trees were planted by an old squaw, who made holes in the ground and then threw in the entire cores of the apples containing the seeds; the trees grew in clusters, thus confirming the tradition. The second year Mr. Chapman lived on his farm these trees bore over 300 bushels of apples, 621 bushels being harvested from a single tree.

In October, 1842, Mr. Chapman moved his family hither, occupying, the house (still standing) the first night without either door or windows, and a roof only partly covered. The family were lulled to sleep by the hooting of owls and the howling of wolves. The succeeding winter was what has since been known as the "hard winter in Michigan," and in common with all the new settlers, he "browsed" his cattle, as neither hay nor fodder of any kind could be obtained; his horse ran with the Indian ponies, and subsisted by pawing away the snow with his feet and eating the long, dry grass of the flats. During the next year or two several families settled in the neighborhood, and a new tp. was organized, and christened. Northampton by Mr. Chapman. About this time Mr. Chapman and Rufus P. Mason erected and presented to the settlers the first school-house built in Chesaning. After a residence of nearly five years in Michigan, Mr. Chapman became weary of a life in the wilderness, and seeing his children growing up without the advantages of an education, returned in August, 1847, to the New England States. Soon thereafter we find him at work with a steam excavator at West Claremont and Cornish, N. H., and subsequently on the Vermont Central at "Slip Hill," near Montpelier. In January, 1850, he moved his family to Wells River, Vt., and during that year was engaged on the Passumpsic railroad, in company with A. P. Balch. In company with his brother Oliver he had contracts on the New Jersey Central railroad at Bray's Hill and at Bloomsbury. In the fall of 1852 he went to Canada and was engaged with Balch, Zimmerman and others on the Great Western railroad, between Suspension Bridge and St. Catherines, employing two steam excavators, near the "Red House." His family resided in the village of Thorold, Ontario. Subsequently, with Sidney Dillon, he had a contract on the Philadelphia & Erie railroad near Jersey Shore, Lycoming Co., Pa. While residing here the dwelling-house was burned to the ground, destroying a large portion of the furniture and nearly all the family wearing apparel. Mrs. Chapman's aged mother narrowly escaped from perishing in the flames.

In the spring of 1859 Mr. Chapman returned to Michigan, and since then the family have continued to reside on the farm purchased on his first visit to Chesaning. Mr. Chapman's last railroad contract was on the Marietta & Cincinnati line, where, as one of the firm of Dodge, Balch & Co., he had work amounting to more than \$2,000,000, building an extension of 16 miles from Loveland to Ludlow Grove the latter a suburb of Cincinnati—and between Chillicothe and Parkersburg, West

Virginia. Many heavy grades were cut down, deep ravines filled up and tunnels made through Filcher and Vanderwalker hills.

Mrs. Chapman's health having failed, and he being somewhat advanced in years, abandoned railroads about 15 years before his death, and Nearly all the remainder of his life was passed on his farm—making frequent visits to his relatives in the Eastern States. During the years 1866–'8, in company with his son-in-law, George W. Hipple, he was interested in the lumber business, owning a steam saw-mill and quite an extensive tract of pine land in the tp. of Albee, Saginaw Co.

Mr. Chapman was of a sanguine temperament, and happy disposition, fond of jokes and an adept at repartee, and woe to the victim who sought to bandy words with him, for Mr. Chapman invariably "turned the tables" upon his adversary and came out victorious.

In politics he was an earnest, uncompromising Republican, and in days prior to the organizing of that party an avowed Abolitionist of the Garrisonian school, having been a reader of the *Liberator* from nearly the first to the last number printed, and never hesitating to advocate the cause of the slave; and in later years, after the emancipation, it was his pride and glory that he had ever been an Abolitionist.

He died suddenly on the morning of Feb. 17, 1881, in the 69th year of his age.

The following is a list of Mr. Chapman's children: George Lyman, born at Lynn, Mass., July 29, 1837; married Serena C. Vincent, of Washington Co., Ohio, Jan. 10, 1866; his children are Serena May, born May 30, 1869, and Florence A., Oct. 11, 1871. Helen Abigail, born at Richmond, Mass., June 8, 1839; married George W. Hipple of Lock Haven, Penn., Dec. 2, 1858. William H. H., born at Washington, Mass., Nov. 9, 1841; married Alice E. Bentley, of Chesaning, April 14, 1870, who died Sept. 2, 1874, and his children are George Henry, born April 6, 1871, and Estella Maud, Dec. 28, 1872; he married Helen A. Judd, of Pontiac, Mich., Dec. 23, 1875. Nancy Cordelia, born at Chesaning, Mich., May 1, 1845; married Albert B. Clough, of Dansville, Mich., Sept. 12, 1867; her children are Mary Lizzie, born Nov. 2, 1868; Helen, born June 14, 1873. James W., born at Claremont, N. H., Sept. 22, 1847; married Josephine Granger, of Oakland Co., Mich., Aug. 10, 1872; his child is Maud M., born April 24, 1873. Elizabeth A., born at Thorold, Ontario, Sept. 19, 1853, died in infancy. Oliver D., born at Jersey Shore, Penn., Jan 9, 1859.

Wellington Chapman. As will be seen in the history of Chesaning village and tp., he was early identified with its settlement, dating back to the autumn of 1841. He is a native of Hampshire Co., Mass., and was born on Sept. 20, 1814. His ancestry is given above, in the sketch of his brother. He learned the trade of a wheelwright from his father, whom he assisted until 20 years of age, when he went to Worcester, Mass., where he worked at car-building; and in 1835, with his cousin "Otis," worked on the construction and finishing of the Boston & Albany R. R. Subsequently Mr. Chapman was largely interested in car-building, and in the construction of railroads throughout the Middle, Eastern and Western States—at times as superintendent for other parties, at other times as contractor. Among those railroads were the Providence & Stonington R. R., at Kingston and East Greenwich, Rhode Island, then in the construction of the Delaware & Schuylkill canal, which work was finally abandoned; the Philadelphia & Norristown R. R., and the Valley R. R. He was also engaged on the Worcester & Springfield, in Massachusetts. This road was afterward merged into the Boston & Albany. In all the above Mr. Chapman was acting for other parties as superintendent or "boss" of construction at different places.

He next took a contract at Charlestown, Mass., to build 100 railroad cars; after finishing about one-half of them, he sub-let his contract to other parties, and took a contract for excavating a portion of the railroad; after working on his contract one year, the railroad company temporarily suspended operations, when he went to East Boston, Mass., and superintended work on excavations for other parties for one year, and then resumed work on his former contract on the Boston & Albany R. R., which he completed. Then he took and completed contracts on the Taunton & New Bedford R. R., and then assisted his brother, O. S. Chapman, in completing contracts on the Boston & Albany R. R., at Washington. At the end of this year, 1841, he came to Chesaning (in company with his brother, George Washington Chapman) and entered land on what was then called "the Big Rock Indian reservation."

Mr. Chapman remained in Chesaning until 1847, and assisted in the organization of the tp. The year above named he returned with his family to New England and resumed railroading, being one of the firm of Boody, Dillon & Co. They took contracts on the excavations to be made on the Hartford & Fishkill R. R., Mr. Chapman having entire management of the work. They had one contract on this road that was stipulated to be finished in 15 months from the time work commenced. It consisted of 45,000 square yards of rock, some 10,000 yards of which lay under one foot of water. The deepest cut was 60 feet. The contract was completed in just 15 months, and is said to be the largest amount of rock ever taken from one solid cut, in the same length of time, in the United States. Subsequently he had contracts on the Ashuelut R. R., and Danbury & Norwalk R. R. He then went to Ohio, and contracted and completed 10 miles of the Marietta & Cincinnati R. R., including the east approach to the Pelcher tunnel, and 10 miles therefrom toward Marietta, including all open excavations and stone work for bridges. This took five years to complete.

He then went to Worcester, Mass., and lived two years, at the end of which time he returned to Chesaning with his family. Since then he has been interested at different times in construction of the following railroads: the Newark & New York, at Bergen Heights, N. J., and the Hartford & Fishkill R. R. in Putnam. Co., N. Y. In company with his two brothers, Oliver S. and E. Chapman, he built the eastern approach to the Omaha bridge on the U. P. R. R., at Council Bluffs, Iowa, since which time he has lived a comparatively quiet life on his farm, which consists of 340 acres on secs. 9 and 10 in Chesaning.

Mr. Wellington Chapman was married in 1838 or '39 to Sarah Gray, who bore him 2 children. She died in 1848, and in 1849 he was again married, to his present wife, Sarah Ann Dickman. By this union there were also 2 children.

In politics Mr. Chapman is a Republican.

Mr. Chapman's children are—Albert W., born Aug. 28, 1842; Eliza, deceased; Julietta Eliza, born March 12, 1849; and Charles E., deceased. Albert W. married Lucy Case, and had 2 children, Sarah A., born May 20, 186—; and Albert W., Jr., Nov. 1, 1870, and died Sept. 21, 1877; Julietta married Edward C. Walden, and has 2 children. Charles W. C., born Dec. 17, 1879; and Edward C., March 12, 1881.