

John Chaney

One of the most distinguished citizens in the history of Canal Winchester, past or present, is John Chaney. He was prominently involved, for most of his adult life, in the political, business, educational, and religious life of the community. He also studied the law.

John Chaney was born in Washington County, Maryland, on January 12, 1790, the son of Nathan and Susannah Chaney. When he was 4 years old, the family moved to Bedford County, Pennsylvania, where his father died when John was 14. His only brother died shortly thereafter, leaving the care of his mother and 3 sisters almost entirely to John. In the fall of 1810 he came to Fairfield County, Ohio, near the present location of Waterloo -- just east of Canal Winchester, and then moved to Pickaway County, Ohio. He returned to Pennsylvania from 1812 to 1815 because of poor health, then permanently moved to Ohio when his health improved, settling in Bloom Township, Fairfield County, before moving into the Village of Canal Winchester around 1860, where he remained until his death on April 10, 1881.

John Chaney is usually referred to as Judge Chaney, in reference to one of his many official titles. He had a long and illustrious political career beginning in 1821 in Fairfield County (note: Canal Winchester was part of Fairfield County until annexed to Franklin County in 1851) and later Franklin County, the State of Ohio, and the United States of America, spanning a total of approximately 40 years. He was a Justice of the Peace, Township Trustee, a member of the Ohio House of Representatives -- including a term as Speaker of the House, a member of the Ohio Senate, an Associate Judge of Fairfield County, and a Representative to the United States Congress. He was a member of the 1832 Electoral College that made Andrew Jackson President of the United States -- which he felt was an honor. He participated in the 1851 Constitutional Convention that framed the Constitution of the State of Ohio. Judge Chaney also served on the Madison Township (Franklin County) Board of Education from subdistrict No. 18, which was the Canal Winchester area. He was an officer in the Ohio Militia.

In 1834, before there were any railroads in the state, John Chaney, while a member of the U. S. Congress, introduced a resolution instructing that the Committee on Roads and Canals look into the expediency of granting lands for the construction of railroads in Ohio. The resolution died in the hands of the committee, but it makes apparent his forward thinking and concern for the people in his district and state. Judge Chaney was involved in the plans for good, navigable roads in the community -- by both sponsoring "acts" to incorporate the turnpikes and his personal monetary investment in the projects. He knew then that the state and the community needed a reliable transportation system, even as we do today.

On February 27, 1846, a "Bill for the Encouragement of Agriculture" was considered in the legislature, creating the Ohio State Board of Agriculture. Although there is no written record, the story told was that when an additional member was needed for a quorum to pass this legislation, a messenger was sent from the capital, Columbus, to Carroll, Ohio, where Judge John Chaney lived. By hard riding through a stormy night, he reached the meeting before midnight so that the bill could be passed. Thus, according to tradition, John Chaney can be given at least some of the credit for the existence of our Ohio State Fair.

Judge Chaney was in the milling business. He bought a mill on Spring Run in Bloom Township where he ran a grist-mill, saw-mill, and a distillery. He later owned the Empire Mill just west of Canal Winchester with his son Oliver -- better known as O. P. Chaney, the man who built the mill that is still standing in Canal Winchester. He had a part interest in a woolen mill near Canal Winchester, and was part owner of a powder factory at Waterloo. He was also a farmer.

Judge Chaney was married 3 times and fathered 11 children. His first marriage was to Mary Ann LaFerre in 1816. They had 5 children before her death in 1823: John and Napoleon, both of whom died in infancy, James, Caroline and Hugh, who became a doctor. He then married Elizabeth Miller and they had 6 children before her death in 1856: Oliver (O. P.), Edward, Nancy, Mary, John, and Lorrain. Judge Chaney's last marriage was to Mary Stephenson, a widow with children, but they had no children of their own.

Judge Chaney's descendants can still be found in the Canal Winchester area as well as in other parts of the country. Among the more famous of his descendants are Lon Chaney of silent movie fame, his great-grandson, and Lon Chaney, Jr.

John Chaney was one of the founders of the Betzer Church, which was Lutheran and German Reform, located outside of Lithopolis, Ohio, in Bloom Township. The home in Canal Winchester that he purchased c. 1860 still stands and is located in the East Columbus Street Historic District, thereby placing it on the National Register of Historic Places.

Judge Chaney still commands, and deserves, our respect and admiration more than a century after his death. One interesting fact is that he never solicited public office, but served when he was nominated. He was described in a family history as a "man of consequence" -- a perhaps old-fashioned but fitting phrase. One account said that the one thing that he was proud of at the end of his long life was that he had the good opinions of his neighbors and constituents -- would that we all could say the same.

Note: Among the sources for this tidbit are: A History of Madison Township written in 1902 by George Bareis, Complete History of Fairfield County written in 1877 by Hervey Scott, and genealogical information from his descendants.