

J. Durfee Sickels was born Feb. 15, 1820 in Palmyra, N.Y., the second in a family of eight children, six of whom have been more or less intimately associated with the history of Clinton and Gratiot counties: Aaron who represented the district at the Legislature and was a prominent citizen of Elsie for many years; William who was Register of Deeds and Judge of Probate for Clinton County and closely allied with the history of Gratiot County; Lucina, the wife of John Kneeland of Elba; Anne, the only surviving one, wife of E.W. Cobb, a prominent citizen of Elsie; Emma, who taught school for about thirty years in the vicinity; and J. Durfee, the subject of this sketch.

Sickels's paternal grandfather, Philip Vran Zietzel [Philip (Von?) Sickels], was of Holland descent, the name being anglicized to Sickels by Philip's son, John F., who moved with his family to Michigan in 1836. They sent their household goods by boat across Lake Erie where they were all lost in a storm. The family came in a coach across Canada, the boys driving the stock. They settled on an improved farm near Northville when the father died in 1839. The family soon moved to another farm near Howell where J. Durfee remained until 1847 when he came, a young man of 27 years, to Duplain. When he had been here two years he married Sarah Jane Cobb who had preceded him into the wilderness with her parents two years before his arrival. She was a descendant of good old Colonial and Mayflower stock, making her a fit pioneer's wife in the new country in which they now established their home.

From his mother, Hannah Durfee, Mr. Sickels imbibed the Quaker faith which dominated his life. His mother was a descendant of Thomas Durfee who came from England to Portsmouth, R.I., in 1660. His maternal grandfather was a Lieutenant of Geo. III but joined the Patriots and served as Minute Man in Capt. Simmon's Co., Col. Olney's Reg., Muster Roll of 1781.

The first public office held by J. Durfee Sickels was in 1851 when he was elected as Supervisor, which office he held periodically until 1884 – 13 years in all. During his administration the Court House was built at St. Johns on its present site. He also held the office during the greater part of the Civil War and it was his duty to look after the widows and orphans, giving them the government supplies, often all too meager for their needs, and during the first few years of his work as Supervisor Duplain included Elba and

Hamilton and as there were no roads, and many [??] and dense forests, his work was an arduous one.

In 1856 he assisted in platting the village of Elsie and with his two brothers, William and Aaron, built and stocked the first store. He was one of the original trustees of the Methodist Church and held the office until his failing health compelled him to resign. He was the second postmaster in the village and held the office for twenty years. He served as Justice of the Peace for eight years, and was elected for a third term but refused to serve. He held the office of township treasurer in 1850 and was afterward township clerk. In 1868 he was nominated for the legislature but withdrew on account of ill health.

What was perhaps the most laborious service given to the public and the one performed under the most difficult conditions, was the work on the State Road which extends from the center of Ovid township 20 miles through the towns of Duplain, Elba and Hamilton. He was commissioned by the governor to superintend the surveying of this road which was built for the purpose of reaching valuable timber lands beyond. The magnitude of this undertaking can scarcely be realized by one who now drives over this broad thoroughfare lined with prosperous farms and pleasant homes. The southern portion was in more or less good condition but the northern part had to be built through an almost impenetrable swamp and unbroken wilderness.

On his return from a session of the Board of Supervisors held in January 1885, the last one he attended, he fell from a platform at Owosso Junction and sustained injuries from which he never recovered and which doubtless hastened his death which occurred in April 1898. His widow survived him seven years, closing an unusually useful life in February 1905. They left an unbroken family of seven children: J. Whitney Sickels of Grand Ledge, Alvah L. Sickels and Mrs. L.G. Bates of Elsie, Mrs. Arthur Hall, Mrs. D.E. Andrews, Mrs. Jennie S. Parker, and Mrs. W.G. Rankin of Detroit.