

# SAMUEL RANSOM SANFORD

## “The Walking Sheriff”

By Frances Harrington

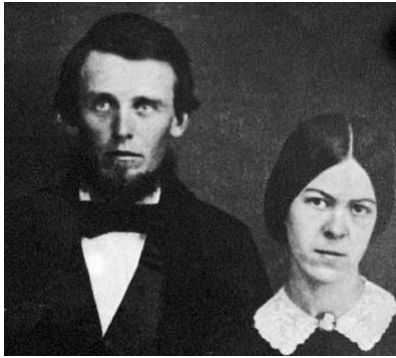
Samuel was the fourth of nine children born to Isaac R. and Patience (Atwater) Sanford. He was born in Wayne County, New York, on August 11, 1822. His father owned a farm and was also a prominent official in the city. Samuel spent his summers working on the farm and his winters in school. At the age of fourteen, he went to work as a clerk in a country store. Later, he went to work for Sanford R. Hall who operated a drug store in Geneva, New York. For a period of time, he went to school at the Geneva Lyceum and then at Lima Seminary. After this schooling, he returned to the employ of Mr. Hall.

In 1844, Mr. Hall closed down the drug store because of his health. It was around that time that Samuel decided he wanted to make a name for himself and start his own drug store somewhere in the Midwest. After checking out a few potential possibilities, he went to Grand Rapids, Michigan. Grand Rapids was a fairly young town with a population of around one to two thousand people. He noticed there wasn't any really good drug stores there and decided that was the place for him to start. He returned to New York to buy supplies for his business and had them shipped back to Grand Rapids. They were shipped from New York in late October but didn't arrive until the Spring. During his trip to New York, he married Susan “Sophia” Huggins, daughter of Zadok and Anna (Morrison) Huggins, of Wayne County, New York. She returned with him to Grand Rapids and while they waited for the supplies to arrive, they got their store ready for business. He was 22 years old when he started the drug store. The couple had two children while living in Grand Rapids, I. Ransom, and Anna M. He was also elected as Kent County Clerk, an office he held for 2 years. At some point, Samuel took on a partner, his brother-in-law, Stephen A. Wood. It turns out that Stephen didn't have much of a head for the business so the two decided to try their hands at lumbering instead. Samuel sold the drug store to one of his employees, then took his family and moved to a spot 16 miles north of what would be the city of Muskegon, on the river in Newaygo. After their mill burned down, Samuel sent his wife and children back to New York, along with Stephen Woods and his family.

By 1852-53, the family was back together in Newaygo County, Michigan. Samuel was a woodsman at the time. A woodsman was a locator of pine timber for the lumbermills. While doing this, he acquired quite a bit of different timber land for himself of beach, maple, elm, oak and basswood, but mainly pine. For a year they lived in a pretty rough log cabin in the depth of the forest. They were all relieved when, after 18 months, they moved into a real log house, not a cabin, on a hill that overlooked the Muskegon River, near Bridgeton Township. It was not far from I.D. Merrill's saw mill on Sand Creek. Samuel's wife, Sophia, especially loved the view.

Sophia died on July 18, 1855, after giving birth to their 3<sup>rd</sup> child. The baby died a couple days later. After that, Samuel moved his children to Muskegon, which was by then a village of about 500 people with several stores. The children were boarded with Mrs. Ellen Boyd at the north end of Terrace Street, not far from the lake. In 1856, he took the children to New York to live with his younger brother, Frank. That same year, Samuel started a shingle mill near the end of

Ottawa Street, south of the Muskegon River, in an area that would come to be known as Sanford's Bayou.

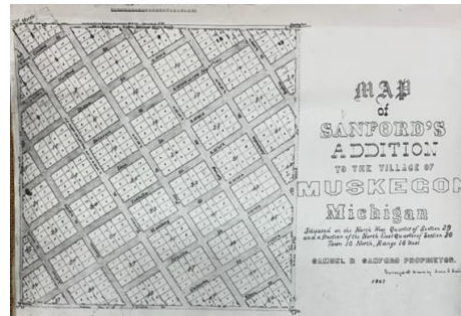


In the summer of 1858, Samuel went back to New York for the summer. He married Ambrosia J. Peck in Gorham, Ontario County, New York. He returned to Muskegon with Ambrosia and his two small children. (Her father, Samuel B. and mother Dency (Cook) Peck, followed the next year.) At that time, Muskegon was still part of Ottawa County. Samuel was living in the village of Muskegon and was elected Sheriff of Ottawa County. Samuel was an avid walker. He would rather walk than ride. During his time as Sheriff, he gained the name, "the walking sheriff" because he walked throughout the County to perform his duties. The only time he didn't walk, was if he had to transport a prisoner. He also never carried a gun. He preferred to use his wits to deal with the situations that arose in the course of his job, rather than resort to the use of a firearm. After Muskegon made its split from Ottawa County in 1859, Samuel continued to be Sheriff, while he lived in Grand Haven, his family kept a home in Muskegon until the end of his 2-year term.

There are different stories about Samuel and his preference for walking. One time, he was in Grand Rapids and was heading back to Muskegon. A couple of men in a horse drawn rig asked him if he'd like to ride with them. He politely answered no. After a few hours, he came upon the same men, who had stopped to give their horses a rest. (The roads were not flat or easy on horses, especially if they were drawing a rig.) The men asked him again if he wanted to ride with them and he again said no, and continued at his normal fast pace. Samuel actually ended up making it back to Muskegon before the men with the rig did. It was said he could out-walk men half his age and in fact, his average speed on foot was about 5 miles per hour. They said he once walked from Muskegon to Sand Creek, (about 21 miles) in 3 hours. In 1860, he was appointed as Census Marshall and canvassed Muskegon County's first Federal Census entirely on foot.

Besides the shingle mill, Samuel became involved in real estate, and 1861 he possessed 400 acres of land at the southwestern part of what was then the village of Muskegon. He had 160 acres of it platted and called it Sanford's Addition. On ten acres, he planted 1,000 peach trees. His orchard was bounded by Peck St. to the west, Sanford St. to the east, Houston to the north, and Merrill to the south. He also planted cherries, plums, pears, apricots, nectarines, apples, grapes, currants and gooseberries. His father-in-law, Samuel Peck, was a fruit grower and both were successful at it. They proved that, if nothing else, at least you could successfully grow fruit in the sandy soil of Muskegon.

He and Ambrosia had 4 children together: Cornelia in 1861, Irwin in 1862, Arthur in 1865, and Marian Louise in 1870. Irwin died in 1864 and Marian in 1871. You will notice that many of the streets in the area of Sanford's Addition that ran north and south, were named after family: Ransom, Arthur, Irwin, Ambrosia, and Sophia (his first wife's middle name). Terrace, Pine, and Spring had already been given their names. He named the east and west streets after grapes: Myrtle, Concord, Hartford, Diana, Delaware, Iona, Isabella, Hamburg, Israella, and Catawba, except for Elton which is a pear. (Note: In later years, Israella was changed to McLaughlin, Hamburg was changed to Catherine, and Elton was changed to Bauer.)



Samuel did quite well in all his endeavors until the “panic of 1873”. (A financial crisis that triggered an economic depression in North America from 1873 – 1877.) During this time, Samuel lost almost all of his personal possessions. Part of this was due to the fact that he had signed bank notes (co-signing for a loan), which he ended up liable for, when the people he signed for, were unable to pay. He had also invested in a lot of land which made him “land poor” and he lost much of the land because he couldn't keep up with the taxes. He also (like many of his fellow lumberman), borrowed large sums of money and with the crisis, he was unable to make the payments. As time went on and the economy improved, he was able to pay back all the money he had owed, dollar for dollar, and some at 10% interest. Through it all, he never filed bankruptcy, like so many others did.

Samuel was also instrumental in bringing the first railroads to Muskegon. He was one of the Directors of the old Chicago and West Michigan Railroads (later part of the Pere Marquette Railroad System). He was also a member of the Board of Education for a number of years and was always agreeable to the more progressive ideas of the day.

He helped establish the first Democratic newspaper, the “Muskegon Telegraph”. It later became the Muskegon Enterprise and was published by his son I. Ransom Sanford.

He never smoked or drank alcohol and was always very active. It was said that he had such a strong grip, that if you shook hands with him once, you were careful to try not to do it again. Samuel stopped all his business dealings in 1897 at the age of 75, when his health started to fail. It had been said of him, “his stewardship of public office was marked by characteristic loyalty and fidelity, and his business activities were directed with honor and fairness...”



Samuel died on September 14, 1899, at his home at 128 S. Terrace Street. His estate was estimated at \$42,000. That would be \$1,462,961.20 in today's money (2022). In 1910, Ambrosia donated the property at Sanford's Bayou to the Muskegon Chamber of Commerce for the "bonus fund". The bonus fund was established as a financial incentive to bring non-lumbering business and industry to Muskegon.

If you're ever in Evergreen Cemetery, across from the Mausoleum you will see a monument that says Sanford on the west side, and Peck on the east side. Members of both families are buried there, including Samuel, Ambrosia, Cornelia, Irwin, and Marian Sanford along with Ambrosia's parents, Samuel B and his wife Dency (Cook) Peck.

Sources: Hackley Public Library (Local History & Genealogy Dept.), Ancestry.com, Lakeshore Museum Center, Romance of Muskegon (Alice Prescott Kyes), Genealogybank.com (Muskegon Chronicle), Portraits & Biographical Records (Biographical Publishing Co), An Account of Muskegon (James L Smith), Wikipedia (panic of 1873), findagrave.com, Muskegon Register of Deeds Office. The money equivalence mentioned in the article was as of May 2022 from CPI Inflation Calculator.