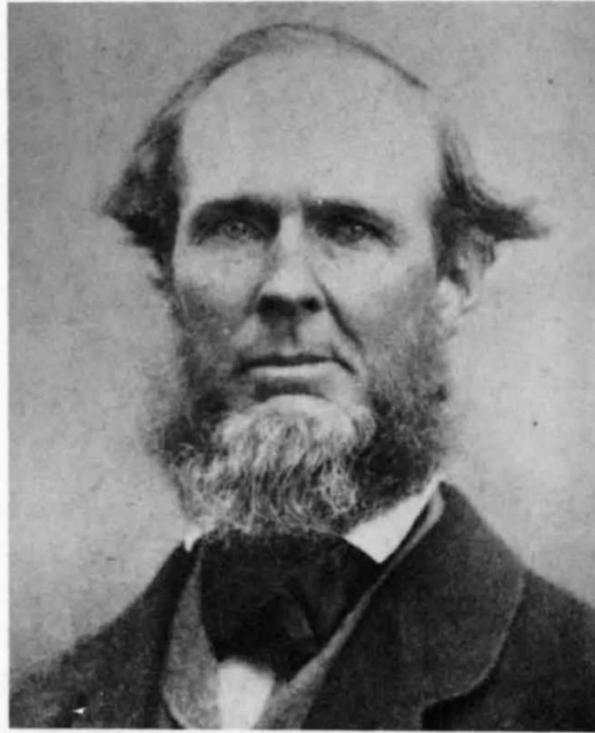


What's in a Name – Confusion and Clarification

By Barbara Bedau Brow
White Lake Area Historical Society



Gouverneur B. Rathbun
1819-1888

Records indicate that Gouverneur Brown Rathbun was born in Scipio, Cayuga, New York on 8 August 1819. He was the eldest of 11 children (5 sons and 6 daughters) born to Charles Rathbone (1796-1876) and his wife Anna Kniffin (1796-1855) who were married in New York on 18 September 1818.

Charles Rathbun who was born in Troy, New York, was one of three Rathbun-Rathbone Brothers who were founders of Grand Rapids. The other brothers were Alfred D. Rathbone (1806-1856) and Amos Rathbone (1808-1882).

Charles Rathbone owned a popular hotel in Grand Rapids called "Rathbone House". According to an 1840 City Directory listing, it was located at the corner of Monroe and Waterloo. It was torn down about 1886.

Amos was the city treasurer, alderman, supervisor and a leading financier. Alfred was one of the town's first lawyers, served as its first postmaster and prosecuting attorney, and helped write the first city charter.

Gouverneur B. Rathbun, son of Charles and Anna, moved to Grand Rapids in 1839, and went into business with his uncle, Amos Rathbone, who had also settled there that year. They opened a general store with a total investment of \$6,000 – each partner putting up \$3,000. The business prospered and, in 1843, Amos and Gouverneur bought land on a busy downtown street and erected the city's first stone business block.

Hearing stories of success from Grand Rapids, Charles Rathbun decided to make the move himself in 1844. Taking his wife Anna, mother-in-law and the 10 youngest children, ranging in age from 3 to 22, he loaded up a caravan of ox-drawn carriages and wagons and set off for Michigan.

In 1850, G. B. Rathbun was listed as a merchant in Grand Rapids. At the time he was 30 years old and living with his parents and 7 of his siblings.

In 1851, Charles bought a farm in nearby Paris Township and moved there with his still unmarried children. His wife died there in 1854, and he was married again, in 1856, to Jane VanTuyle. Charles died in Grand Rapids on 12 November 1876.

Gouverneur bought out his uncle Amos' interest in the business block known as "The Wedge" and finally sold it in 1853. He then entered the newspaper business and with a partner, Nathan Church, bought the Grand Rapids Times, but with unhappy results. An ardent Democrat, Gouverneur was a bitter foe of Michigan Republican Senator Zachariah Chandler, and when Chandler died in 1879, the Times carried a front-page headline, "Zach Chandler Is Dead – Thank God." Circulation of the Times dropped from 1,200 to 600 within days, and in two years it folded. Gouverneur then bought a farm near Grand Rapids and lived there until his death.

Gouverneur Rathbun married Emily Tucker (1835-1916) on 2 October 1858 in LaGrange, IN. They had a son, Amos Morton (1864-1927).

Gouverneur B. Rathbun was appointed Postmaster on 5 October 1858 for a post office located in Marr, in Oceana County. It appears he served in that position until 21 November 1862. The office was discontinued on 8 December 1862.

In 1860, when the census was taken, G. B. Rathbun was 40 years old and listed as living in White River. His occupation was lumberman. At the time it appeared he was living in a Boarding House along with several mill hands and sawyers.

Perhaps it is during this time that he acquired the mill from the late George Rodgers' estate and formed the Cone and Rathbun mill at Green's Landing in the area near where the former Lakeside Inn used to be located. The identity of Mr. Cone is unknown.

The Cone and Rathbun mill was sometimes referred to as "Governor's Mill". This was probably due to the pronunciation of his first name. Additionally, it has been mentioned that G. B. Rathbun was the Governor of Michigan. However, state records show that there has never been either a Michigan Governor or Lt. Governor by the name of Rathbun or Rathbone.

In the 1870 census it shows G. B. and his wife Emily along with their 7-year-old son Amos living in Grand Rapids where he was listed as a farmer.

G. B. Rathbun died on 27 March 1888 in Paris Township from kidney disease. His wife Emily died on 2 March 1916. They are buried in the family plot in Fulton Street Cemetery.

Unfortunately, brothers Amos Rathbone and Charles Rathbun became estranged in middle age. The two brothers did not speak to one another for the last decades of their lives. Family tradition says they quarreled over the spelling of their last name, but surviving letters indicate a more logical reason – Amos borrowed money from Charles to finance his early operations and apparently failed to repay it in full.

The three brothers who played such important parts in the early history of Grand Rapids have only a few descendants in the area today and none with the Rathbun or Rathbone name.