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# THE HUNTSVILLE HISTORICAL REVIEW

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THE HUNTSVILLE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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## EDITOR'S REPORT

It is with much trepidation yet a sense of pride that I wish to acknowledge that I have been appointed to succeed Elbert Watson as editor of the Review. Mr. Watson's duties as Director of the Huntsville-Madison County Public Library system preclude him from continuing as editor.

This is your Review. If you have suggestions as to the format of the Review please feel free to contact me at any time. If you have suggestions for articles to appear or material to submit for publication, please do not hesitate to contact me. Remember the Review is but a reflection of the membership of the society and you can help so much to make it a fine representative of our way of life.

Henry S. Marks

PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIRST ALABAMA CONGRESSIONAL  
DELEGATION: 16TH CONGRESS OF THE UNITED  
STATES 1819 to 1821

by

Henry S. Marks

and

Richard A. White

Alabama was admitted<sup>1</sup> to the Union on December 14, 1819 as the 22nd state,<sup>2</sup> and after much effort, the new state's first congressional delegation was selected. John Williams Walker<sup>3</sup> and William Rufus King were named to the Senate and John Crowell was elected to the House of Representatives.

As was to be expected, Madison County played an important role in the selection of Walker and King and the election of Crowell. It may even be argued that Madison County was the 'kingmaker' in the selection of our first two senators.

On the surface, it seemed that the two senators were chosen by the State Legislature rather amiably. There was an understanding that one senator was to come from north Alabama and one from the southern region of the state. The choice of the Tennessee Valley was Walker; the Alabama and Tombigbee region chose King. Beneath the surface, however, two men were to offer opposition to the selection of Walker and King; Charles Tait and William H. Crawford, both Georgians.<sup>4</sup> Crawford had become the Secretary of the Treasury in the Monroe Administration and considered Alabama part of his territorial imperative as far as patronage was concerned. Our first territorial and state governor, William Wyatt Bibb, was a close friend of Crawford, and it was probably through the latter's influence that Bibb was appointed governor of the Alabama Territory.

Tait, Georgian and friend of Bibb and Crawford, became involved with Alabama as early as 1802 when he notified the federal Senate of the state of Georgia's consent to a division of the Mississippi Territory. Later he was a chief architect of the final bill which provided for division of the Territory in 1817.<sup>5</sup> Tait resented being overlooked as a Senator, but was in a political and geographical dilemma. Walker was set to represent north Alabama and could not help his friend Tait. Neither could Crawford, although he certainly tried. Crawford offered a land office receivership to King as an inducement to get him to allow Tait to be chosen from the southern section of the state.<sup>6</sup> But King could not be persuaded to step aside and Walker, once he became a senator, was able to obtain for Tait the federal judgeship in Alabama, at the expense of Harry Toulmin, who had been federal judge for the Alabama Territory.<sup>7</sup> Thus it was Walker and King who served as our first senators.

Walker took his seat first, on December 14, 1819, his term to expire, as determined by lot, on March 3, 1825. On Tuesday, December 16, six days before King took his seat, Walker was appointed to two standing committees, the Committee on the Militia and the Committee on Naval Affairs.<sup>8</sup>

King took his seat on December 22, 1819, his term to expire as determined by lot, on March 3, 1823. According to Albert James Pickett, in his History of Alabama, and Incidentally of Georgia and Mississippi, From the Earliest Period, King learned of his selection as a senator only while in Georgia on his way back to Alabama from a trip to his former residence in North Carolina to dispose of his holdings there. On reaching Milledgeville he received a letter from Governor Bibb informing him of his selection. Although, in Pickett's words, "this was the first intimation that Colonel King had heard that his name even had been presented to the Legislature for that high honor...",<sup>9</sup> King immediately accepted the position,



retraced his steps and arrived in Washington a few days before the meeting of Congress, Walker having arrived before him.

On January 3, 1820, two additional standing committees were created by the Senate and the following day King was appointed to one of them, the Committee on Indian Affairs.<sup>10</sup>

The senators, then, began their service in the 16th Congress, which met from March 4, 1819 to March 3, 1821, including the first session from December 6, 1819 to May 15, 1820, and the second from November 13, 1820 to March 3, 1821.

John Walker had the more illustrious career of the two up to this time. A native of Amelia County, Virginia, he moved with his father to Elbert County, Georgia, during childhood. He received an excellent education, first in a private academy in Georgia and then at what is now Princeton University, graduating from this institution in 1806.<sup>11</sup> Walker then studied law, was admitted to the bar, began practice in Petersburg, Georgia in 1810 and married Matilda, the daughter of LeRoy Pope of that town. In the same year Walker moved to Huntsville with his father-in-law and several of his neighbors and began his law practice. He served as a member of the Territorial House of Representatives in 1817, being selected its speaker. He was president of the state constitutional convention of 1819, and the same year declined the appointment of district judge, tendered him by President Monroe. Unfortunately, ill health forced him to resign his seat in the Senate on November 21, 1823 and he died on April 23, 1823. According to Pickett, Walker was a tall, slender man, with "manners and address, mild, graceful and prepossessing."<sup>12</sup>

William King, unlike Walker, was to serve Alabama for a much longer period of time, finally passing away on his plantation, "King's Bend," on April 18, 1853.<sup>13</sup> A native of North Carolina, and a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, King, like Walker turned to

the practice of law and to a life of political service. He served in the North Carolina house from 1807 to 1809, and was a federal Congressman from 1811 to 1816. For the following two years he served as secretary of the American legations at Naples and St. Petersburg. He returned to the United States and moved his residence to Alabama during the winter of 1818-1819. He took an active part in the development of statehood, being a prominent member of the Constitutional Convention. King was placed on the committee appointed to draft the Alabama Constitution and was one of three members chosen to put it in its final form.

The selection of King as Senator from Alabama was actually the beginning of his national political prominence, for he was to serve as Senator continuously from 1819 to April 15, 1844, when he resigned from that august body. From 1844 to 1846 he served as Minister to France and again served in the Senate from July 1, 1848, until his resignation on December 20, 1852. His political career culminated in his being elected Vice President of the United States in 1852. Thus, unlike Walker, when he was first selected as senator in 1819, his political future largely lay ahead of him. According to Pickett the senator was about six feet tall, and "remarkably erect in figure." He also possessed, according to the same source, "fine colloquial powers."

The only representative to the federal congress actually to be directly elected by the people of Alabama was John Crowell. He was born in Halifax County, North Carolina, about 1785. In 1815 he came to Alabama as the Indian agent of the federal government according to Thomas McAdory Owen,<sup>14</sup> to the "Muscogees." It is known that in 1817 he had a temporary residence in St. Stephens, and that a John Crowell was listed in the 1820 census of Dallas County as single and owning seven slaves. Crowell served only one term as Congressman, being appointed agent in 1821, on the removal of D. B. Mitchell, who had served as Governor of Georgia at one time. He served in this capacity until the Indians were moved to the

Indian Territory in 1836. He died ten years later, in Fort Mitchell, Alabama.<sup>17</sup>

Crowell was opposed for the seat in Congress by Henry H. Chambers, who represented Madison County and most of the Tennessee Valley. Chambers was defeated for the house seat at this time, but was to become a United States Senator from Alabama before his untimely death in January, 1826 at the age of 35, while on the way to the federal capital to claim his seat for the first time (having been selected by the state legislature for the term which began in December, 1825).<sup>18</sup> Madison County voted solidly for Chambers, giving him 2,382 votes for Crowell's 215.<sup>19</sup> Limestone County was even more favorable to Chambers: he received over 1,000 votes to a mere 12 for his opponent. But central and south Alabama did Chambers in. The Alabama Republican on October 2, 1819 made the comment that "We are now most apprehensive that our fellow citizen Doct. Chambers is not elected to Congress ... His majority in the Tennessee Valley is between four and five thousand ...." Two weeks later the Huntsville Weekly announced that ".... We have received sufficient returns from the election to satisfy us that Mr. Crowell is elected Representative to Congress."<sup>20</sup>

Madison County and Huntsville lost its bid to control Alabama's only seat in the federal House of Representatives. Crowell took his seat in Congress on the 14th of December, 1819.<sup>21</sup> Yet they had a more than able senatorial representative in John Walker.

Seldom has a state's first congressional delegation had a greater impact upon the fortunes of our country. The year 1819 was a crucial one in United States history. Domestic problems dealing with financial chaos and the question of slavery and westward expansion had to be faced by the American people. Expansion to the south involved possible conflict with Spain over the avowed intention of some members of the federal government (and considerably more outside it) to obtain the Floridas at all cost. Walker and King, and to a much lesser extent, Crowell, took advantage

of the possibility of joining in debates and action in and out of the Congress concerning these problems and at least Walker was able to influence final decisions on these matters.

Probably the most lasting influence of the first Alabama congressional delegation was in the area of public land policy and the relationship of this policy with the Panic of 1819 and its aftermath.

Walker had previously taken public positions on the question of the sale of public lands by the federal government before Alabama became a state, and, according to Hugh Bailey, his positions had "increased his popular esteem and further endeared him to his fellow Georgia men."<sup>22</sup> Bailey also asserts that "Walker became the advocate of a most liberal land policy" by the creation of the Alabama Territory. Well he might, for he was most certainly involved in business relations with land purchases and speculators in the Territory, centering about the Huntsville area.

Far too much land had been sold by the federal government, in fact, and, along with poor banking practices on the part of state banks, particularly in the west, had helped to precipitate the Panic of 1819. Far too much land had been sold in Alabama in particular, for over fifty percent of funds due the United States Public Land Office in 1820 was due from the new state of Alabama alone.<sup>23</sup> For a number of reasons, especially in an effort to encourage rapid settlement of western lands, the federal land laws of 1800 and 1803 basically allowed for an over extension of credit to the purchaser. With the advent of the Panic of 1819 it was obvious that most of the recently sold lands of the federal domain would revert to the government. The land speculator as well as the average settler would have to forfeit, losing most, if not all, their possessions. The results would be catastrophic.

It was obvious the land laws would have to be altered. In 1820 Walker and King were unsuccessful in gaining surcease for the people who had already purchased land. In January of this year Walker had

submitted to the Senate a motion,<sup>24</sup> "that the Committee on Public Lands be instructed to inquire into the expediency of protecting any occupant in his possession, when the land on which he shall have settled shall be sold, after the month of March in any year, until he shall have and gathered his crop." However, the motion was defeated. Walker then proposed an amendment to the proposed new land bill the Senate was considering:<sup>25</sup>

"And be it further enacted, that purchaser of public lands, which shall have been sold prior to the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ next, shall be permitted to forfeit and surrender the same before the day of final payment by delivering their certificates to the register, and endorsing thereon their consent that the land therein described shall be resold: whereupon, the said certificates shall be considered as cancelled, and the lands shall be deemed and taken to have reverted to the United States, and shall be disposed of, in all respects like other reverted or forfeited lands, according to the provisions of the fourth section of this act: but if such lands shall sell for more than one dollar and \_\_\_\_\_ cents per acre, the excess shall be paid over to the former certificate holder: provided that such excess shall not be greater than the amount previously paid on such certificate."

This, too, was defeated, even though King fully supported Walker. King made an eloquent speech on the floor of the Senate, reminding the members they should "take into consideration the condition of those who had purchased lands from the government." King emphasized "that those who had purchased under the old system would be in a worse condition than those who will purchase under the new one."<sup>26</sup> By the 1820 Act credit was abolished and the minimum price of the public land was reduced to \$1.25 per acre.

In January, 1821 Walker tried again. On January 15, he presented a petition signed by a number of

Alabamians stating the new law operated unfairly against them and that they may be permitted to apply payments already made by them "to such positions of their entries as such payments will cover at two dollars per acre<sup>27</sup> ..." This petition was the first of many attempts of Walker and King to amend fundamentally the Act of 1820. Walker reintroduced his 1820 amendment with little actual change and met with much better success, so much success that Hugh Bailey, in his biography of Walker, calls him the father of the Land Law of 1821. Walker delivered the longest speech of his career, on January 22nd, in support of his beliefs and, together with King, cast the deciding votes to prevent substituting 25 for 37½ per cent as the discount rate offered for immediate payment. The debt question was uppermost in his mind and Walker concluded his January 22nd speech with the following words:<sup>28</sup>

It is for you now to determine whether they shall be stifled by the horrible incubus of this debt, which presses upon their vitals, paralyzing their energies, and arresting the wholesome play of their organs: whether they shall be crushed by this gigantic Colossus, which bestrides the vast and fertile region of the West, with one foot in the Gulf of Mexico, and the other known not where—on the shores of the lakes, on the summit of the Stony Mountains, under whose "huge legs" your fellow citizens in that quarter "must peep about" to find the grave of their hopes and fortunes!

The Land Act of 1821 probably did more than anything else to make Walker a hero in Alabama, yet he, as with King, was against "easy" bankruptcy laws passed these two years. What Alabamians wanted was financial solvency, the ability to pay off their debts and not go into bankruptcy. This Walker and King (to a lesser extent) provided them. In a speech before the Senate in March, 1820, King stated he was in favor of a bankruptcy law "if confined to the trading part of the community,"<sup>29</sup> and not extended to all classes.

It was King's belief that "it would be extremely injurious, if not ruinous, to the planters and farmers to be subjected to the operation of such a system..." of bankruptcy for all classes and groups of people.

Walker was for continued sale of public lands and he even offered a motion in the Senate in January, 1820, that two additional land offices be established in Alabama, at Tuscaloosa and Conecuh Courthouse.<sup>30</sup> The Alabama senatorial delegation was interested not only in aiding those who had already purchased lands but in continuing the sale of lands in Alabama and elsewhere, in an endeavor to restore prosperity. Walker attempted to aid the ill-fated "vine and olive," or French colony, by presenting in the Senate a petition to amend the original federal act creating the colony. This was not enough, however, to save the colony. Prosperity was to be only an illusion for many, many people in Alabama.

Settlement of the western territories had forced the burning issue of slavery to override even the problem of land sales, as far as most of the American people and Congress were concerned. When King and Wallace were selected to the Congress the struggle over slavery was in its second year of debate in this country, centered over how Missouri would be admitted to the Union. Naturally, as representatives of a southern state, King and Walker opposed the restriction of slavery in Missouri as elsewhere.<sup>32</sup> Both were satisfied with the famous Missouri Compromise<sup>33</sup> and generally the people of Alabama applauded their attempts to keep slavery from being excluded from Missouri.

Another aspect of the expansion of the country was the acquisition of the Floridas by the United States, in the Adams-Onis Treaty.<sup>34</sup> Alabamians had long coveted the section east of the Mobile area, claiming this part of west Florida to be a geographical and physiological part of the state. Walker tried to obtain this area for Alabama when he introduced in the Senate on February 22, 1821, a memorial asking that the "country lately ceded by Spain as lies west

of the Appalachian River..." be annexed to Alabama. This move, of course came to naught.

The final effect of expansion of the country upon the Alabama delegation to be discussed here was the question of federal aid for development of canals and roads in the west. Walker can again be used as an example of what many Alabamians felt. In January, 1821, there was prolonged discussion in the Senate as to whether or not the federal government should aid in construction of a canal between "the navigable waters of the Ohio to Lake Erie." The bill in question would provide for the appointment of commissioners to "lay out" the route of the Ohio and Erie Canal. On January 11, 1821 Walker declared on the floor of the Senate that "such a work ought not to be undertaken unless as part of a great system of internal improvement ..."<sup>35</sup> This antedates Jackson's veto of the Maysville Road bill by quite a few years.

#### CONCLUSION

Alabama was fortunate to have King and Walker as its senatorial representatives. Together they accomplished a great deal, Walker in particular for his activity in the Senate as well as for his role in the development of the Land Act of 1821. Crowell, however, is another matter. In the perusal of the Annals of Congress for the period of the 16th Congress Crowell is very rarely mentioned. Evidently he accomplished very little. Little is known about him, either, and it is my opinion that Alabama would have been far better served in the federal house by Chambers, the man Crowell defeated.

Huntsville and Madison County have made notable contributions to Alabama history. John Williams Walker is a part of this heritage.



<sup>1</sup>Adams, James Truslow, ed. Dictionary of American History, 7 vols. (New York, 1961), V. 5, 249.

<sup>2</sup>Webster's Geographical Dictionary, rev. ed. (Springfield, Mass., 1965), 17.

<sup>3</sup>The definitive biography of Walker is by Hugh C. Bailey, who did his doctoral dissertation on the life of Walker, and then published it as John Williams Walker (University, 1964).

<sup>4</sup>Abernethy, Thomas Perkins, The Formative Period in Alabama 1815-1828 (University, 1965), 49-50; 58-60.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 50.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Annals of Congress of the United States, 1789-1825 (Washington, 1834-1856), December 16, 1819, 26.

<sup>9</sup>Pickett, Albert James, History of Alabama, and Incidentally of Georgia and Mississippi, From the Earliest Period (Birmingham, 1962), 644.

<sup>10</sup>Annals, January 3, 1820, 51, and January 4, 1820, 57.

<sup>11</sup>Biographical Directory of the American Congress 1774-1961 (Washington, 1961), 1765.

<sup>12</sup>Pickett, 637.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. 641-647 and Biographical Directory, 1168.

<sup>14</sup>Owen, Thomas McAdory, History of Alabama and Dictionary of Biography, 4 vols. (Chicago, 1921), V. 3, 432.

<sup>15</sup>Biographical Directory, 758; Marks, Henry S., Who Was Who In Alabama (Huntsville, 1972), 49; Abernethy, Formative Period, 53, 115.

<sup>16</sup>Brannon, Peter, "Indian Treaties," The Alabama Historical Quarterly, vol. 12, (1950), 249.

<sup>17</sup>Marks, Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Marks, Henry S. Sketches of the Tennessee Valley in Antebellum Days: People, Places, Things (Huntsville, 1976), 14.

<sup>19</sup>Huntsville, Alabama, Republican, Oct. 2, 1819, 2.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., October 11, 1819.

<sup>21</sup>Annals, December 14, 1819, 726.

<sup>22</sup>Bailey, Hugh C., "John W. Walker and the Land Laws of the 1820's," Alabama Review (July, 1955), 814.

<sup>23</sup>American State Papers, III, 645.

<sup>24</sup>Annals, January 26, 1820, 256.

<sup>25</sup>Annals, February 20, 1820, 444.

<sup>26</sup>Annals, February 22, 1840, 448.

<sup>27</sup>Annals, January 15, 1821, 183.

<sup>28</sup>Annals, January 22, 1821, 236.

<sup>29</sup>Annals, March 31, 1820, 564.

<sup>30</sup>Annals, January 25, 1820, 237

<sup>31</sup>Annals, January 8, 1821, 147.

<sup>32</sup>Annals, December 28, 1819, 1320; February 7, 1820, 1138; February 12, 1821, 354-355 and Bailey, Walker, 108-119.

<sup>33</sup>Bailey, Walker, 119-123.

<sup>34</sup>Annals, February 22, 1821, 366.

<sup>35</sup>Annals, January 11, 1821, 154.

THE AMERICAN COLONIZATION SOCIETY IN ALABAMA  
1825-1833

by  
Robert E. Perry

BACKGROUND

By the beginning of the nineteenth century a growing number of thoughtful Americans was becoming concerned about slavery as well as the presence of large numbers of free Negroes. Out of this concern grew several proposals to deal with the question. Thomas Jefferson, Ferdinando Fairfax, and St. George Tucker of Virginia had suggested settling free Negroes in areas far removed from the United States. Others believed settling them in an area of the newly acquired Louisiana territory would be a better course. Nothing came of either of these suggestions.

At the same time a successful effort was being made by English humanitarians to settle Negroes from the British Isles in Africa. Beginning in the late 1780's, several shiploads of Negroes were settled in what is today Sierra Leone. The colonization attempt, however, resulted in a great deal of hardship and death for the colonists and as a result the British government assumed the responsibility in 1808.

It was to this African colony that the first American Negroes were sent in 1816 by Paul Cuffee, a half-Negro, half-Indian shipping merchant from Cuttyhunk Island, Massachusetts. Cuffee proposed to transport skilled artisans, farmers, and mechanics to Sierra Leone in return for trading privileges in the colony. He secured the backing of several prosperous free Negroes, formed miniature African Institutions which were replicas of the parent society in England, and petitioned Congress for special permission to trade with Sierra Leone. His

petition was not granted because of the war with England at that time. After it ended, he landed 38 free American Negroes at Freetown, Sierra Leone. He died shortly afterwards before he could carry out his dream of shipping large numbers of Negroes to the land of their forefathers.<sup>1</sup>

#### ORGANIZATION OF THE AMERICAN COLONIZATION SOCIETY

The American Colonization Society was organized in Washington, D.C. in the winter of 1816-1817 under the direction of Robert Finley. Its exclusive purpose as stated in article two of its original constitution was:<sup>2</sup>

.....to promote and execute a plan for colonizing (with their consent) the free people of colour, residing in our country, in Africa, or such other place as Congress shall deem most expedient. And the Society shall act, to effect this object, in co-operation with the General Government, and such of the States as may adopt regulations upon the subject.

The Society drew its support from all classes of men: from slaveholder and non-slaveholder and from all sections of the country. It included among its original founders Senator Henry Clay, Senator Daniel Webster, Senator Robert H. Goldsborough, John Randolph of Roanoke, Ferdinando Fairfax, Francis Scott Key, Richard Lee, Bushrod Washington, and Edmund I. Lee.<sup>3</sup> Within a few years it added other distinguished names to its membership such as John Marshall, Charles Carroll, and Roger Taney.<sup>4</sup>

The Society failed in its early years of existence to persuade Congress to make colonization a national policy. The Reverend Samuel J. Mills was sent to explore the west coast of Africa to gather more information for Congress and to choose a possible site for a colony.<sup>5</sup> Mills reached the coast of Africa in March, 1818, traveled to prospective sites, met with several chiefs, and finally recommended that Sherbo Island be chosen as the place for the future colony. He died at sea enroute back to the United States.<sup>6</sup>

The following year Congress passed Mercer's Slave Trade Act which authorized President James Monroe to send a squadron to the west coast of Africa to establish a station for settling rescued victims of the slave trade. Although reluctant to apply this law to the colonization of free Negroes, Monroe eventually acquiesced to allow the Society's agents to become government agents, and gave them some assistance in establishing the colony. The first expedition sailed from New York in 1820, but it was not until 1821 that land was purchased that was to become Liberia, the colony for free Negroes from the United States.<sup>7</sup>

By 1823 the Society was in difficult financial circumstances both in Liberia and in the United States. Its plan of securing further government support for its colonization work did not materialize. Because there was no organized plan for establishing and maintaining new local societies the Society faced an early death.

During a careful examination of the Society in 1823 by the managers, a proposal was put forward by Leonard Bacon of Andover Seminary to begin a spirited propaganda campaign to include a national magazine, traveling agents, and establishment of societies in every state. After some debate the managers decided to accept Bacon's ideas. Their first step was to appoint Ralph Gurley as secretary. His choice was a decisive factor in the Society's success during the next few years, and he was the guiding force behind it for 50 years. For the first time agents were appointed to tour various parts of the country enlisting members and financial support and organizing state and local societies.<sup>8</sup>

One of Gurley's most important acts was the establishment of The African Repository and Colonial Journal in 1825. Under his editorship it became a tremendous asset for the Society. It boosted Liberia and encouraged contributions by printing and praising the names of contributors. A wealth of information about Africa was provided and letters published from those who settled there. Gurley gained a great deal of publicity for the Society by persuading American newspapers to reprint articles from The Repository concerning colonization and Liberia.<sup>9</sup>

## FIRST CONTACTS OF THE SOCIETY IN ALABAMA

Although no official agents of the Society reached Alabama until 1830, The Repository did. A Huntsville resident, James Gillespie Birney, who later became the most noted member of the Society in the State, first contacted the Society through its magazine in 1826. He was so impressed with the aims of the Society that he sent a donation and persuaded the local Presbyterian Church in Huntsville to take an annual collection for it on July 4.<sup>10</sup>

Other evidence of The Repository's circulation in Alabama comes from two letters printed in the June, 1827 issue. The first was "From a gentleman in Alabama" who lamented the fact that he had been unable to establish an auxiliary society in his area but did send contributions and subscriptions totaling \$17.00. The second letter commended the magazine for dispelling misconceptions of the Society which the writer had held and which he said were common in the area. The language and tone of the letter suggest the possibility that it may have been written by Birney.<sup>11</sup>

Both of these letters reveal misunderstanding and resentment of the Society and its aims. This may have been due to resolutions addressed to the Alabama legislature from the legislature of Ohio. In 1824, when the Society was seeking endorsement from the state legislatures, the Ohio lawmaker adopted a petition calling on Congress to adopt colonization as a means of eradicating slavery. This declaration was sent to other states, where it was commended by the legislatures of Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey, and Kentucky, but soundly criticized in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Missouri.<sup>12</sup>

Before any official agent of the Society came to Alabama, the Methodist Conference of Mississippi appointed one of its ministers as an agent to travel throughout Mississippi and Alabama to raise money for the Society. The minister chosen in 1829 was the Reverend William Winans who reported a collection of \$15.68 in Alabama that year. A second minister, the Reverend John C. Burris, was appointed by the Conference in 1831.<sup>13</sup>

A society, whose origin is obscure, was organized in La Grange on May 3, 1829. No mention of its organization was made in The Repository but its first anniversary meeting was reported in the Southern Advocate of Huntsville in May, 1830. At the meeting the Reverend Daniel Bestor, pastor of the Baptist Church and president of the society, gave a glowing report of the progress of Liberia and urged local support for the Society. It had a total of ten officers which may also have been the number of members.<sup>14</sup>

#### THE ORGANIZATION OF THE SOCIETY IN ALABAMA

In January, 1830, the first official auxiliary society was organized in the state. In December, 1829, Birney, a prominent citizen and former mayor of Huntsville had received a letter from Henry Clay introducing Josiah F. Polk, agent of the Society for the southwestern states. Polk spent several days in Huntsville with Birney who introduced him to leading citizens and assisted him in organizing the Madison County Society.<sup>15</sup> The meeting was advertised in the local paper and met on January 2 at the First Presbyterian Church where Birney was an active member. Polk spoke on the interests of the Society and noted in his report that he received a friendly reception. Dr. M. S. Watkins was elected president and Birney was named one of the managers.<sup>16</sup>

Polk was approached twice during his visit to Huntsville by free Negroes who inquired about emigrating to Liberia. The first, John Robinson, a mulatto told him that several free Negroes had formed a society to devise means and raise funds to go to Liberia, but had been frustrated by whites who suspected them of seditious purposes. The second also inquired about Liberia, mentioning that he had received letters from a colored man in the North warning him about the severe climate and deaths among the colonists in Liberia. Polk left Huntsville in high hopes that there would soon be a number of emigrants ready to leave Huntsville and other nearby areas in Alabama.<sup>17</sup>



Polk's next stop in Alabama was at the state capitol in Tuscaloosa where he found both the legislature and supreme court in session. There on the night of January 11 he addressed a large group in the Representatives' Hall and organized a state society. Over \$200 was pledged, \$141 paid down and several individuals became life members by paying \$10. Among the 38 persons who joined the state society, five were judges of the state supreme court. The Honorable Abner S. Lipscomb of Mobile was elected president. Other officers and managers were elected and a constitution adopted. The constitution contained a clause entitling it to nominate and select a number of emigrants proportionate to its share of the total national contributions to the Society. The local press was favorable to the Society, commending its purposes and urging citizens to give it their support.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the state society at Tuscaloosa and the auxiliary society at Huntsville, Polk organized societies at Courtland, Tuscumbia and Florence.<sup>19</sup> Among the members enrolled were many prominent judges, legislators, merchants, doctors, ministers, former members of the state constitutional convention and a future governor.<sup>20</sup> At the completion of his tour there were over a hundred members and six societies, and contributions had exceeded two hundred dollars. The Repository also gained a wider circulation in the state.<sup>21</sup>

The state's societies were visited again in 1831 by agent Henry Bascomb, a Methodist minister who later became Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Bascomb was one of the Society's most effective and colorful agents. In a few months time he traveled thousands of miles by horseback and coach throughout the western and southwestern states organizing societies, selling subscriptions to The Repository, and collecting funds amounting over \$300.<sup>22</sup>

#### JAMES G. BIRNEY AND THE COLONIZATION SOCIETY

Despite these successes, by the summer of 1832 the Society was facing an early death in Alabama due to a

lack of interest among its members. In January, 1831, the state society had held its annual meeting at Tuscaloosa which turned out to be dissentious and disorderly. Lipscomb resigned as president shortly afterwards and efforts to secure a meeting of the managers were unsuccessful.<sup>23</sup>

At this critical point James G. Birney was appointed as an agent. Birney had arrived in Huntsville in 1818 from Danville, Kentucky after having attended Princeton University and being admitted to the bar. He bought several hundred acres of land at Triana, a few miles from Huntsville, and began raising cotton with the use of slave labor. He was unable to succeed as a planter, however, so he sold his plantation and most of his slaves and moved into Huntsville where he resumed the practice of law in 1823.<sup>24</sup>

By 1832 Birney was a respected member of Huntsville society where his lucrative law practice earned him \$4,000 per year. In the intervening period he had served as a member of the state legislature, mayor of Huntsville, and as agent to select the original faculty of the newly established University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa.<sup>25</sup>

The board of managers of the Society appointed Birney as agent for the southwestern states in June, 1832.<sup>26</sup> He did not accept the offer immediately but, as was his custom, gave it very careful thought. He made a thorough study of the Society and its literature, and discussed the offer with close friends who strongly advised him against accepting.<sup>27</sup>

It was not until August 23, two months after his appointment, that Birney accepted the position. In his letter of acceptance he carefully outlined the condition and prospects of the Society in Alabama. The societies in the state, he said, were languid and decaying, but he believed that they could be revived with activity and attention. He also disclosed his plan of operation for the Society in the state: he would attend the legislative sessions, gain their good will, and present a solid case for colonization based on facts. He felt this would allay suspicions that the Society planned to interfere with the institution of slavery.<sup>28</sup>

After thoroughly acquainting himself with the policies, objectives, and activities of the Society, Birney set out with great vigor to revive the state and local societies. In the fall of 1832 he visited throughout the Tennessee Valley speaking, recruiting, and organizing societies. In addition to the old societies at Huntsville, Tusculumbia, Courtland, and La Grange he organized new ones at Somerville and Athens and reorganized the one in Florence which elected General John Coffee as its president.<sup>29</sup> He also enlisted the interest of two families of free Negroes of Limestone County in emigrating to Liberia.<sup>30</sup>

From the Tennessee Valley Birney proceeded by stage to Tuscaloosa where he met with the state society and received collection of \$45.00 but little favorable response. He did, however, enlist Henry Tutwiler in the Society. Tutwiler, whose name became increasingly prominent in the state's future, was a newcomer to the faculty of the University and had been recruited for the position by Birney himself. He wrote Birney shortly afterwards that he felt nothing would be done by the society in Tuscaloosa, and asked to be a member of the society in Huntsville.<sup>31</sup>

Proceeding on to Montgomery and Mobile by stage and river boat, Birney found a similar situation to the one in Tuscaloosa: there was little favor or response given to his appeals. In each place he had to defend the Society against attacks by the Christian Examiner. In Mobile he planned to speak twice, but the proposed second meeting was ruined by the appearance in town of a famous actress who drew almost the entire town to her performance. He decided not to take a collection or try to organize a society in Mobile as he felt it would be futile.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to defending the Society against the charge of being abolitionist, Birney had to explain its purpose against similar charges being made in state newspapers. A speech by United States Senator Clement Comer Clay was printed in the Huntsville Democrat and quoted him as saying ".....abolition is the ultimate purpose of colonization..."<sup>33</sup> Birney wrote to Clay, a personal acquaintance, pointing out that this was a

mistaken view of the Society's aims and asked him to correct his statement.<sup>34</sup> Clay examined the matter carefully and wrote the Huntsville Democrat that his statement was not intended to imply that the Society was abolitionist but only that some members (of the national society) were abolitionist. He added, "I am no enemy of the plan of transporting and colonizing our free black population, properly conducted." He felt, however, that state legislatures and the societies should finance colonization rather than appealing to Congress for assistance.<sup>35</sup> The Society, however, was hurt by Clay's printed speech, because several months elapsed between the reported speech and the correction.

Birney returned discouraged to Huntsville after his tour through South Alabama. To his friend Gurley he wrote: "There is a deadness to the subject of African Colonization in this portion of Alabama which is altogether discouraging...in countries where slave labor is valuable it requires benevolence to keep up our cause---christian benevolence,---the stock of which is small all through this region."<sup>36</sup> Despite the discouragement he forged ahead with his activities. In January, 1833, he placed a notice in the Huntsville papers addressed to free Negroes announcing the departure in April of a ship for Liberia from New Orleans. He asked local societies and other interested parties to publicize the project and assist emigrants to reach New Orleans.<sup>37</sup> He also planned to attend the meeting of the Synod of west Tennessee (which included the Presbyterian churches of Alabama at this time), where he would introduce a resolution regarding the Christian's duty concerning slavery.

In February Birney traveled by boat to New Orleans where he spent the latter part of February, all of March and part of April making preparations for the departure of 150 free Negroes for Liberia aboard the Ajax. They left on April 20 and it was a deeply moving experience to Birney. In a report to Gurley he recorded the event and his feelings.

Memory presented to me Africa, "robbed and spoiled"-  
"weeping for her children - refusing to be comforted"-  
now I saw her rejoicing at their return; - I thought  
of the shriek of phrenzy, the stifled groan of death  
in the slaveship, --now, I saw the sobered joy of the  
restored and in their countenances the beams of an  
elevating and glorious hope; --I saw Avarice dragging  
them to our shores, wringing from them cries of despair  
and tears of blood; I now saw benevolence (oh, that it  
were unmixed) conducting them to their own, their  
Fathers' land, drawing from their grateful hearts tears  
of joy, and thanks and blessings. Sir, Sir, if it  
be weakness to sympathize with the miserable made happy  
--to rejoice, even to tears, at the contemplation of this  
my country's true glory --to feel an overmastering expansion  
of heart at this practical exhibition of benevolence  
so like God's, then I am most weak indeed.<sup>38</sup>

After returning to Huntsville, Birney decided on a  
new tactic. He did not feel he was reaching enough  
people by his speeches to local societies. Perhaps  
it would be better, he thought, if he wrote articles  
for the local newspapers. In this way he hoped to  
reach thousands in the surrounding states and Alabama.

In the preface to his first article in the May 16  
edition of the Huntsville Democrat, Birney contended that  
this important question needed to be discussed publicly.  
If he and the colonizationists were wrong, they needed  
to be refuted publicly; if they were correct then appropriate,  
informed action needed to be taken.<sup>39</sup> By this  
time he had decided that "appropriate action" should  
be by state legislatures rather than by Congress.  
Appeals to Congress, he felt, tended to agitate Southerners  
and arouse their old suspicions that the Society  
was merely an abolitionist plot. He tried to enlist  
support for state action by writing to numerous prominent  
men throughout Alabama, asking them to sign a  
petition to the state legislature calling for state  
support for the colonization effort.<sup>40</sup> Several of the

state societies had made such petitions previously and some individuals, including General Coffee, felt this was the proper approach.<sup>41</sup>

The series of articles which appeared regularly in the Huntsville Democrat was reprinted in many newspapers in Alabama and the South. In them Birney clearly set forth the purpose of the Society which was the colonization of free Negroes with their consent. He consistently maintained that it was neither abolitionist nor northern in origin (these were two common objections made about the Society to Birney). He also examined and refuted charges of the abolitionists that the Society was doing harm to the free colored population.<sup>42</sup>

After publishing fifteen articles in the papers, Birney decided to suspend publication because of increasing criticism that they were offensive to local sentiment on the subject. Some persons in Huntsville had complained to the editor that too much of the newspaper was taken up with "colonizing the free colored population."<sup>43</sup> Although the newspapers in the Tennessee Valley and elsewhere had reprinted his articles, newspapers in the lower parts of Alabama were either suspending their publication or refusing them altogether.<sup>44</sup>

By late September, Birney concluded that the state provided little encouragement for the Society and decided to return to Kentucky, where his father was in failing health. He was especially appalled at the insensibility of the religious community on the subject of colonization. The slave owners were, he said, "So far from sending their slaves to Liberia the greater part are not slow to justify slavery..."<sup>45</sup> Nothing could be done, he feared, to get rid of slavery in the South unless it cured itself.

In November Birney terminated his service with the Society and left Alabama never to return. He had been the real force behind the movement and it died when he left. Its name and the names of local societies and contributors ceased to appear in The Repository, except in rare compilations of cumulative statistics. In 1852 a note appeared to the effect that since its founding a total of 49 free Negroes had emigrated from Alabama to

Liberia. Only one of these had emigrated during Birney's residence in Alabama. The reported emigrations probably refer to free Negroes sent by John Cocke of Virginia, who maintained a plantation in Alabama to which he sent his manumitted slaves for acclimation and training before sending them on to Liberia.<sup>46</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Several facts emerge about the operation of the Society in Alabama. Foremost, it was founded on an appeal to prejudice against the free Negro population. A few people supported the Society out of humanistic or religious motives. Chief among these would be Birney, Tutwiler, and the Reverend Bestor of La Grange. The Society probably failed because it was never able to overcome the suspicion that its goal was abolition, although the Society was not abolitionist and was, as a matter of fact, repeatedly attacked by the abolitionists as a plot dreamed up by slaveholders to strengthen and perpetuate slavery, by removing the threat of the free Negro population.

Another important factor contributing to the demise of the Society in Alabama was Birney himself. Although he entered the Society with a great deal of determined enthusiasm and idealism, his belief in it steadily declined and sapped his effectiveness. For a long time he had serious questions about the morality of slavery and frankly confessed to Ralph Gurley that "My mind is not at ease upon the subject of retaining my fellowcreatures in servitude.. Should I remove from this state, I will send all the slaves I own to Liberia."<sup>47</sup> He slowly came to believe some abolitionist charges that the Society's policy of emigration for free Negroes was actually strengthening slavery rather than weakening it as he had thought. In less than nine months after leaving Alabama he wrote a lengthy letter to his friend, the Reverend Thornton J. Mills, secretary of the Kentucky Society, declining the office of Vice President and stating why he could not accept it. He said: "my opinions of colonization, in some of its most essential features, have undergone a change, so

great, as to make it imperative on me no longer to give to the enterprise that support and favor which are justly expected from all connected with it."<sup>48</sup>

On June 2, 1834 in a solemn ceremony in the presence of all members of his family Birney freed the five houses of slaves he had owned in Alabama. He then paid Michael, the head of the slave family, back wages with interest for all the years he had served him. Following this action, he published and distributed thousands of copies of his lengthy letter to the Reverend Mills repudiating the Society and attacking slavery. It was the beginning of a new, life long career as an abolitionist which was to bring him to national prominence. Birney thus, was the first native Southerner and former slaveholder to come out openly and strongly against slavery.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>1</sup>P.J. Staudenraus. The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 1-11.

<sup>2</sup>The African Repository and Colonial Journal (Washington: 1825-89), X, 22. (Hereafter referred to as The Repository).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>4</sup>Staudenraus, Colonization Movement, 70.

<sup>5</sup>Gardiner Spring. Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel J. Mills (New York: The New York Evangelical Missionary Society, 1820), 135.

<sup>6</sup>Staudenraus, Colonization Movement, 43-47.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 50-58.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 69-79.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 100.



<sup>10</sup>James G. Birney, Letters on Colonization, Addressed to the Rev. Thornton J. Mills, Corresponding Secretary of the Kentucky Colonization Society. (New York: Office of the Anti-Slavery Reporter, 1834), 4.

<sup>11</sup>The Repository, III, 116.

<sup>12</sup>Staudenraus, Colonization Movement, 169-170.

<sup>13</sup>The Repository, V, 190; VI, 80; VII, 345.

<sup>14</sup>Southern Advocate (Huntsville), May 28, 1830; The Repository, VI, 129-132.

<sup>15</sup>William Birney. James G. Birney and His Times; The Genesis of the Republican Party with Some Account of the Abolition in the South Before 1828. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1890), 90.

<sup>16</sup>Southern Advocate, January 1, 1830; The Repository, VI, 170.

<sup>17</sup>The Repository, VI, 75-76.

<sup>18</sup>The Repository, VI, 75-76; Alabama State Intelligencer (Tuscaloosa) January 15, 1830.

<sup>19</sup>The Repository, VI, 379-380.

<sup>20</sup>Dwight L. Dumond, ed., Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857. 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., Inc., 1938) I, 43.

<sup>21</sup>The Repository, VI, 128, 179, 379-380.

<sup>22</sup>Moses Henkle, The Life of Henry Bidleman Bascomb. D. D., LL.D., Late Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal South.

<sup>23</sup>Birney, Letter on Colonization, 6.

<sup>24</sup>Betty Fladeland, James Gillespie Birney: Slaveholder to Abolitionist (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1955), 1-13.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>26</sup>Dumond, Letters of James Birney, I, 6.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 8; Birney, Letter on Colonization, 4.

<sup>28</sup>Dumond, Letters of James Birney, 20.

<sup>29</sup>From James Birney's Account Book, excerpt in Dumond, Letters of James Birney, 32. I, 32.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 30. The Negroes had been slaves of Reuben Tillman of Madison County.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 37-40.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 48-50.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Huntsville Democrat, May 16, 1833.

<sup>36</sup>Dumond, Letters of James Birney, 48-50.

<sup>37</sup>Huntsville Democrat, January 17, 1833.

<sup>38</sup>Dumond, Letters of James Birney, 50-53.

<sup>39</sup>Huntsville Democrat, May 16, 1833.

<sup>40</sup>Dumond, Letters of James Birney, 76-79; 81-82; 88.

<sup>41</sup>Gordon Chappell, The Life and Activities of John Coffee (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1941), 214-215.

<sup>42</sup>These articles began appearing in the Huntsville Democrat on May 16, 1833 and ended on August 15, 1833. They were reprinted by many other newspapers. The first seven of the articles were reprinted in The Repository beginning in August, 1833, and ending in January, 1834.

<sup>43</sup>Huntsville Democrat, August 15, 1833.

<sup>44</sup>Dumond, Letters of James Birney, 82-83.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>46</sup>Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 36; James G. Sellers, Slavery in Alabama (University, Alabama, 1950), 240.

<sup>47</sup>Dumond, Letters of James Birney, 51-52.

<sup>48</sup>Birney, Letter on Colonization, 1.

<sup>49</sup>Fladeland, James Birney, 82-85.

ALBERT RUSSEL ERSKINE, THE HUNTSVILLE  
"BOY WHO MADE GOOD"

by

George Dickerson  
and  
Henry S. Marks

For nearly half a century, large illuminated block letters spelling HOTEL RUSSEL ERSKINE have been a focal point on Huntsville's panoramic skyline.

Most of the history of the hotel is fairly well known to Huntsville residents, but the memory of the man whose name is seen atop the building has become somewhat obscured with the passage of time. The large hotel was named for Albert Russel Erskine, a Huntsville native who became president of the giant Studebaker automobile manufacturing company in the 1920s and was recognized as one of the nation's most prominent industrial magnates of that time.

In Huntsville, the late Studebaker president was thought of as the local boy who made good "up North," and that is why letters spelling his name are seen on the city's skyline today. "Up North" for Erskine was principally South Bend, Indiana, the place he lived most of his life and where he would be proclaimed a captain of industry. Yet Huntsville was the town where his meteoric career began.

The Huntsvillian, who would build an industrial empire in the North, was descended from a line of pioneer American Anglo-Saxon ancestors. Three generations of his family had firmly established the Erskine name in this area. His

grandfather was Dr. Alexander Erskine who had served as a physician in the Confederate army during the Civil War. A maternal great-grandfather, Albert Russel, had been a colonel in Washington's army during the Revolutionary War and had come to Huntsville as one of the town's first settlers.

Albert Russel Erskine was born in Huntsville on January 24, 1871, the son of William Michael and Sue (Ragland) Erskine. The future industrial leader attended public and private schools until he was 15 and then dropped out to enter the business world as a \$15-a-month office boy in a Huntsville railroad office. It was not long after that that he rose to the position of chief bookkeeper in that office with a then substantial salary of \$65 a month. Erskine worked in the railroad office until he was 27.

He then left Huntsville to move to St. Louis for a job as chief clerk with the American Cotton Company. A few years later he had become general auditor of the company's operating department with responsibility for 300 cotton gins throughout the South. From 1904 until 1919, Erskine was treasurer and a member of the board of Yale and Towne Manufacturing Company, and the next year became vice president and member of the board of directors of the Underwood Typewriter Company.

Erskine joined the Studebaker Corporation in South Bend in 1911 as treasurer and member of the executive board. Four years later, at the age of 44, he had climbed to the top spot as president of the company. Until that time, the Studebaker firm had been primarily engaged in the manufacture of horsedrawn carriages, and it was Erskine who was credited with making the transition to the production of automobiles.

Early accounts indicate that Studebaker's rise in the automobile field to a place of rank nationally and internationally began with

Erskine's presidency. Following the former Huntsvillian's election to the top job, the company spurred ahead, and in 1921 when the automobile industry over the county suffered a setback, Studebaker leaped ahead by 30 per cent. Eyes of the entire manufacturing world began to turn to Erskine. While forging the Studebaker Corporation into one of the country's leading producers of automobiles, Erskine was also serving as president of the Pierce Arrow Company, president of the S.P.A. Truck Corporation, vice president and director of the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, and director of a large South Bend bank.

Erskine's prominence in South Bend was not confined to his role of Studebaker president. He also played a major part in the city's development by his participation in many community projects and activities. The Studebaker head served on the city planning commission and was instrumental in implementing a city beautification program. In addition, he acted as chairman of campaigns to raise building funds for the city's hospitals, Y.M.C.A., and the University of Notre Dame and served as president of the board of lay trustees of Notre Dame.

One of Russel Erskine's pet projects in South Bend was the development of a residential section called Twyckenham Hills, a 600 acre tract on the western edge of the city. The division had been copied in part from Twyckenham, England. There might, however, been some nostalgic motivation for this endeavor, because Twickenham (although spelled differently) was once the name of Huntsville. Erskine planned the entire Twyckenham project himself, laid it out and specified all improvements as well as paying for the entire development. It was also in the Twyckenham Hills section of South Bend that the Studebaker president built his palatial mansion where he lived with his wife and son, Russel Erskine, Jr.

The Erskine mansion was one of South Bend's most elegant and largest homes. It sat in a secluded wooded area of rollings hills, which also was reminiscent of Erskine's native Huntsville. The mansion was purchased by the Catholic church folowing Erskine's death, and today the large rambling structure is part of the St. Mary's Academy for girls.

Russel Erskine was an ardent sports fan and especially fond of football. He iniated an annual Albert Russel Erskine football award that was presented to teams selected by sports writers all over the country and by a judging committee of 30. The former Huntsvillian had said that he felt there should be recognition of championship football teams since every sport but football produced championship teams at that time. The award was a large gold cup that was given to the coach of the selected team.

In sports, Erskine himself was best known for his game of golf. The Studebaker president was a hard man to beat on the golf course. His love for the fame led him to donate 120 acres of his estate to the city of South Bend for construction of a golf course. The course was named Erskine Hills and is still in use today. The Erskine Hills clubhouse still contains several tournament trophies won by Russel Erskine.

By the late 1920s, Erskine had become famous throughout the nation and was recognized as one of the country's leading industrialists. South Bend was now home for the Studebaker president, and it had been many years since he had left Huntsville. But Russel Erskine was still considered a Huntsvillian in his hometown when a group of Huntsville businessmen decided to build a major showplace hotel in the town. They decided the building would be a high-rise structure of 12 stories and would be called the "Joe Wheeler," after the colorful confederate general who had moved to Alabama after the Civil War.

The group of businessmen pooled their funds and resources to begin the mammoth project. Almost immediately a snag developed when it was discovered that not enough money was available to finance construction of the large building. Money was in short supply. The hotel idea seemed to be ill fated. Then the group remembered the former Huntsville boy in South Bend who had become a millionaire. Perhaps he would come to the aid of his old friends. Officers of the original company were T.T. Terry, president; M.M. Hutchens, secretary; L.B. Goldsmith, treasurer; and directors J. Emory Pierce, R.L. Schiffman and Wells Stanley.

So Erskine was contacted, and sure enough, he agreed to provide the needed funds to go ahead with construction. But Erskine had one stipulation: that the hotel be called the Russel Erskine and not the Joe Wheeler. Construction then proceeded on Huntsville's Russel Erskine Hotel.

Work on the building moved smoothly, and in 1930 Huntsville, Alabama, had a 12 story skyscraper in its downtown section with large electric illuminated letters on top spelling "Hotel Russel Erskine." The doors were opened to the public and the facility was incorporated as the Huntsville Hotel Corporation.

The Russel Erskine was the tallest and finest hotel to be found within 100 miles. The structure stood proudly above Huntsville's other downtown buildings and could be seen from the surrounding countryside. The new hotel offered 150 guest rooms, a resplendent ballroom, numerous banquet rooms, and a spacious lobby that was as elegant as could be found in major hotels anywhere.

Huntsville still was a small southern town, and times were hard; but the new hotel became at once a major attraction and entertained guests from throughout the south as well as many from "up North." Early accounts disclose that many



persons from communities around Huntsville came just to look at the new "fancy" hotel. Albert Russel Erskine also came to Huntsville from South Bend to enjoy the facilities of the hotel that he had helped make possible. But ironically, Erskine died tragically at his South Bend estate less than two years after the hotel was opened, and did not see it reach its full renown.

Huntsville, like every other city in the nation was hard hit by the depression years. South Bend, Indiana, where Albert Russel Erskine was now making his home, was also struck by the depression; and the Studebaker Corporation was in financial trouble.

Studebaker had become one of the biggest money-making car manufacturing firms in the country under the leadership of Erskine. The company had even prospered during the early years of the great depression. But in early 1933, the nation's economic situation took its toll, and Studebaker went into receivership. Erskine was now 63 years of age and in failing health. This plus the decline of the company he had headed for so many years proved too much for the man who had known almost constant success.

On July 1, 1933, Albert Russel Erskine was found by his son in the Twyckenham Hills Mansion dead from a self-inflicted bullet wound. The next day, banner headlines appeared in South Bend newspapers quoting a part of Erskine's suicide note "Nervous System Shattered I Cannot Go On."

Notables from throughout the business world attended the funeral of Erskine at the South Bend mansion. The list included such names as Harvey Firestone, the rubber manufacturer; Edward N. Hurley of Chicago; and advertising pioneer Albert D. Lasker. Following the funeral in South Bend, Erskine's body was transported to his native Huntsville where it was entombed in the Erskine mausoleum at Maple Hill Cemetery. The mau-

soleum is located in the Erskine addition at the cemetery, donated by him to the city of Huntsville. He also donated the memorial gateway to the cemetery. Five years before his death Erskine paid his first visit to the city and at that time requested that he be buried in the mausoleum.

Much of Erskine's fortune had been lost when Studebaker went under. His stock in the hotel was sold back to the Huntsville Hotel Corporation. The rest of his estate was sold, and little was left for his family.

The Russel Erskine itself was to enjoy both good and bad days. Today it is closed and final disposition of the hotel has yet to be determined. It no longer "owns" Huntsville's Skyline, for it has newer competitors, the Central Bank Building, the County Courthouse and the City Hall. Yet it remains an impressive sight and a memorial to one of Huntsville's earlier "boys who made good."

SHORT HISTORIES OF THREE ACTING GOVERNORS  
OF ALABAMA IN THE ANTE-BELLUM PERIOD

by

Henry S. Marks  
and  
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The Tennessee Valley before the Civil War was one of the most important political regions in the state, yet it is most unusual that the only three men to serve as acting governors of Alabama during the ante-bellum period were from the Tennessee Valley. They were Thomas Bibb of Limestone County, Samuel B. Moore of Jackson County, and Hugh McVay of Lauderdale County.

The Bibb family stands pre-eminent in early Alabama history. Six of eight brothers settled in Alabama. Two became governors, the first and second chief executives of Alabama; a third was a prominent lawyer and judge of the criminal court of Montgomery; while a fourth served in the Alabama Legislature before moving to Mississippi.

Thomas Bibb, the second governor of Alabama, was born in Amelia County, Virginia, in 1784. He moved to Egbert County, Georgia, with his parents. When he was 12 his father died, leaving the widow to raise Thomas and seven other children. That she did a remarkable job is attested by the success of her children.

Thomas received his education in Egbert County, an education more than adequate according to the times. He became a planter and a merchant. In 1811 he moved to Alabama, then part of the Mississippi Territory. Thomas settled near Huntsville and built "Belle Mina," one of the great ante-bellum mansions of Alabama. It was located northeast of Decatur and

southwest of Huntsville, and became part of the southeastern corner of Limestone County when the latter was created by an act of the territorial legislature in 1818. The town of Belle Mina slowly began to develop around the Bibb plantation.

Later Thomas designed a home for his daughter, Mrs. Adaline Bibb Bradley. Constructed between 1824 and 1832 on Williams Street in Huntsville, it is the present home of Miss Eleanor Hutchens. The structure has exterior walls 20 inches thick and three foot partitions between the two front rooms and hallway. Patterned after Belle Mina, it has been called a "worthy example of the finest work of the classic revival period in Alabama."

Thomas Bibb soon became involved in political and financial matters. His elder brother, William Wyatt Bibb, had been appointed governor of the Territory of Alabama by President James Monroe in September, 1817. The following April he began his duties, but the population of the territory developed so rapidly that statehood was applied for soon. In 1819, Alabama became a state. William Wyatt Bibb was elected the state's first governor, defeating Marmaduke Williams by 1200 votes. Thomas was a major influence in the election of his brother to the governorship.

Thomas Bibb was one of the three delegates from Limestone County to the State Constitutional Convention held in Huntsville in 1819. He was elected to the first Alabama Senate and, partly through the aid and endorsement of his brother, was elected president of the Senate.

Thomas' election as president of the Senate was important, for during the summer William was thrown from a horse during a thunderstorm and died from injuries received in the fall on July 9, 1820. As president of the Senate, Thomas succeeded his brother as governor.

The new governor, although conscious of the enormity of the task confronting him and aware of the difficulty in succeeding the immensely popular William Wyatt Bibb, immediately assumed the authority and responsibilities of the state's Chief Executive. On November 6, 1820, Acting Governor Bibb delivered his report and legislative proposals to the assembly meeting in Cahawba, the capital. A top priority in his program was securing a "further appropriation" for the purpose of completing the State House. To promote the growth of the new city on the Alabama, the Acting Governor also outlined a plan for the surveying of two hundred additional lots to be auctioned off later in November, 1820. Such a plan reflected optimism on the part of the Governor at a time when a nation-wide panic or depression plagued the entire United States, partially because of the influx of cheap British manufactured goods, the speculation in western lands, and the adjustment of the world-wide economy to the Napoleonic wars and their effects. Even those Alabamians who had bought land in Cahawba at the first sale were petitioning the legislature for relief on their installments. Yet Bibb was confident the city and outlying area would continue to grow despite temporary economic setbacks.

In addition to considering the future expansion of the capital, Governor Bibb and the assembly paid tribute to the former governor, Alabama's first Chief Executive, by changing the name of Cahawba County to Bibb County, the name which that county today carries. Acting Governor Bibb was asked to transmit a condolence resolution to the former Governor's widow, expressing the legislature's "sincere regret for the loss" of and its "profound respect" for the deceased Governor. The Assembly also provided for an elaborate funeral procession headed by Acting Governor Bibb to honor the former Governor.

At this stage, Bibb's harmonious working relationship with the Assembly ended, for he sought passage of an apportionment law. Wishing to retain the seat of government at Cahawba, the Senate regarded anti-Cahawba Bibb as a governor by chance and refused to enact an apportionment law before its adjournment on December 22, 1820. Not to be deterred by the legislature's inaction, Acting Governor Bibb became more determined to use his executive power to coerce passage of a new apportionment law before his tenure as governor ended in November, 1821. The Governor's desire for an immediate reapportionment law was further kindled because in the upcoming gubernatorial election in August, 1821, it was assumed that South Alabamian Israel Pickens would defeat Madison Countian Henry Chambers. Thomas Bibb had chosen not to run for the Governorship.

At the insistence of the Huntsville assemblymen, other Tennessee River valley political leaders, and the Tuscaloosa lawmakers, Governor Bibb called the legislature into special session in Cahawba on the first Monday in June, 1821. This was the first special session of the legislature to be called by a Governor of Alabama. In his message to the Assembly, delivered by the Secretary of State, Governor Bibb chided the legislature for its lack of cooperation in passing an apportionment law in its regular session and urged them to act swiftly to enact such a law in accordance with the provisions of the state constitution.

The state Senate, contending that the senatorial terms would not expire until August, 1822, at which time it stated that body should be re-apportioned, passed a bill providing for apportionment of only the House. After a heated debate in the House, that body narrowly passed the apportionment bill; subsequently, the bill went to the Governor for his signature. On June 18, 1821, Governor Bibb sent the bill back to the Senate, the house of its origin, along with a statement declaring the bill unconstitutional. The veto was the first in Alabama history.

Bibb's accompanying veto message justified his actions by saying that when the action of both branches of the Assembly was "insufficient", it could be "overruled in a constitutional manner by that body which is the immediate representation of the people." The Senate handily passed the bill over the Governor's veto, but the House sustained the Chief Executive's action. In the final analysis, however, Governor Bibb lost, because the legislature adjourned without passing an apportionment bill.

In August, 1821, Israel Pickens was elected the state's third Chief Executive, but the Governor-elect was not to take over until the Assembly reviewed the election results and officially declared the victorious candidate Governor. Therefore, when the legislature convened for its first regular session the first Monday in November, 1821, Governor Bibb, who was leaving office, nonetheless delivered a detailed message to the Assembly. In his program, Governor Bibb called for the incorporation of a state university whose trustees would be empowered to sell the two townships of land given by Congress for that purpose at not less than \$15 per acre. The board of trustees would also have the authority to invest the proceeds from the land sale in a state bank. Further related to the economic situation, Governor Bibb also criticized the Huntsville Bank for its suspension of specie payment. He lamented the fact that Huntsville Bank bills were acceptable for payment of debts to the state and that while the state accepted the bills at par or face value, the state's warrants were paid in Huntsville Bank notes at a 15-20% depreciation. To remedy this disparity, Bibb proposed that the banks operating in the state enter into a proposal for a general state bank. If they did not favorably react to the plan and act accordingly, Bibb suggested that the acceptance of Huntsville Bank notes be discontinued until the banks began specie payments again.

On November 7, 1821, the office of Governor passed from Thomas Bibb to Israel Pickens. Although Pickens' inaugural message was conciliatory toward the Acting Governor, anti-Bibb feeling generated by the controversy over the apportionment law remained strong in the Senate. Only the House of Representatives drafted a resolution in praise of the outgoing Governor. As a result of the Senate's slighting, Bibb's reply to the expression of thanks was addressed only to the House. The Senate's affront of the former Governor was noticed throughout the state. In Huntsville, at a dinner given in honor of the former Acting Governor, the toasts offered by those present reflected the anti-Senate feeling present in the Tennessee Valley. One such toast asserted that the constitution of Alabama could not be destroyed by a "faithless Senate."

Although Bibb chose not to run for governor after finishing his brother's term, he did not withdraw from political life, for he was a member of the convention of 1825, called to amend the constitution of 1819, and he served again in the state legislature. Thomas served two terms in the House, from 1828 to 1830.

Quite probably the reason Thomas Bibb never returned to high office in the state was the development of the political division within Alabama. Georgians, led by LeRoy Pope, who had moved to Huntsville in 1810, and William Wyatt Bibb, who had built a plantation home at Coosada, near Montgomery, had founded the Planters' and Merchants' Bank in Huntsville. Popularly known as the Huntsville Bank, it began operations in October, 1817. Those associated with the bank were simply known as Georgians or associated with the "Georgia" party. Those opposed to this private bank wanted to create a state bank. The opposition had its way, and, led by Israel Pickens, Alabama closed the Huntsville Bank on February 1, 1825.



Later the Georgians were given the name Royalists, or Royal Party. As William Brantley so aptly puts it in his "Banking in Alabama," there came a time when to be identified as a member of the Royal Party was the "kiss of death" at the polls. Thomas Bibb was once a director of the Huntsville Bank, thus his political fortunes waned statewide.

Thomas Bibb subsequently devoted his time largely to economic interests. He died in Huntsville on September 30, 1839. He was buried in the family cemetery on the plantation, but his remains were transferred some 20 years later to the Bibb plot in Maple Hill Cemetery in Huntsville.

Samuel B. Moore has the distinction of being the only Governor of Alabama from Jackson County - and having served one of the briefest periods in that office.

Born in Franklin County, Tennessee in 1789, Moore moved to Alabama with his family while still a child. His family settled in Jackson County, two miles northeast of Woodville at Spout Springs.

In 1824 Moore began a distinguished political career by representing Jackson County in the state legislature. After serving several terms in the lower house, he was elected to the Alabama Senate in 1829. He was re-elected the following year and chosen as president of the Senate.

It was from that position in the Senate that he succeeded to the Governor's chair in March, 1831, after Governor Gabriel Moore of Madison County (and of no known relation to Samuel) resigned his office to assume a U.S. Senate seat.

Samuel Moore served as Acting Governor for almost nine months, ending his tenure as the state's sixth chief executive in late November.

In his bid for election that month to a full term as Governor, Moore was pitted against John Gayles of Green County and Nicholas Davis, a Whig planter from Limestone County. Gayle, an eloquent orator,

emerged the victor and Moore returned to his new residence in Pickens County.

Throughout his political career Moore enjoyed the reputation of being a man of character and action, a politician who elicited confidence or chagrin from his constituents.

He was deeply involved as governor in a dispute concerning the United States Bank and the State Bank.

He also opposed the nullification concept of John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. On this issue Moore stated that "...the State may nullify the acts of Congress by declaring them inoperative and void within its limits, and set up for itself. But before it takes this step, it ought carefully to weigh the advantages of secession, against those of the Union, and see that the former clearly preponderate."

This stance by Moore was a contributing factor in his defeat in 1831 by Gayle, who campaigned in favor of nullification, citing James Madison as authority for his point of view.

After serving as Acting Governor, Moore represented Pickens County in the state Senate from 1834 to 1838 and he served again as president of that chamber in 1835. He ended his political career as judge of the Pickens County Court from 1835 until 1841.

Moore died on November 7, 1846, at Carrollton, the county seat of Pickens. So ended the career of a man whom William H. Brantley, in his "Banking in Alabama 1816-1860," called "probably the most opinionated Chief Executive ever to serve the State." Brantley also wrote that, had some exciting event occurred during his tenure, "he would have been ever remembered with honor or regret."

A man of action, Moore had little opportunity as governor to show what he could do under difficult or exciting circumstances.

Many important people get "lost" in history over the years. Take for example Hugh McVay, who once served as acting governor of Alabama.

McVay was born in South Carolina in 1788, the son of a farmer. Evidently he received very little formal education in his native state, and decided to move to an area more conducive to the development of a man of moderate means. He chose Alabama, moving to Madison County in 1807.

McVay was able to purchase land here and was able through the years to amass considerable real estate. By the end of his life he was regarded as a "planter of large means," according to one account.

Alabama was still part of the Mississippi Territory when McVay moved to Madison County. The territory had been created by act of Congress in 1798. In 1817, the territory was divided; Mississippi was admitted to the Union and the area to the east became the Alabama Territory (which was to achieve statehood two years later).

McVay entered state politics during the territorial period, representing Madison County in the territorial legislature from 1811 to 1817. With the formation of the Alabama Territory, McVay moved to Lauderdale County, where he was to remain for the rest of his life. He was the sole representative for Lauderdale at the 1819 constitutional convention which framed the first Alabama constitution.

In 1820 he began his long tenure in the Alabama Legislature. With the exception of 1825 and 1837, McVay was to serve in the legislature for 24 years, from 1820 to 1844. In 1820 he served in the House; then, from 1822 most of his legislative service was in the Senate.

For most historians the highlight of McVay's political career actually came in 1836, when he was elected president of the Senate, defeating Samuel Moore by one vote.

In June of the next year, Governor Clement Comer Clay of Huntsville resigned to become a U.S. Senator. As president of the state Senate, McVay replaced him as Governor in July. He discharged the duties of the governorship until the inauguration of Governor Arthur Bagby in December.

To these writers the highlights of McVay's political career came in 1840-1841 when he again was a member of the Senate. Before 1840, elections for the U.S. House of Representatives were by districts. In that year the Democratic Party in Alabama passed through the legislature what is known as the "general ticket." Since there were large Democratic majorities in North Alabama, Democratic leaders went to a plurality method of election -- with voting statewide, not by district -- in the hope of overwhelming Whig opposition. The top five vote-getters would all be elected to the Congress.

McVay was a Democrat, yet he opposed the measure -- the only Democrat to do so. In 1841 the general ticket was repealed by the legislature, the district method of election was reinstated, and McVay vindicated.

This was the real highlight of the man's political life: To stand for his principles, alone if need be, and to be supported by his constituents at election-time, as McVay was.

He was held in high esteem by his contemporaries. William Garrett, who was Alabama Secretary of State from 1840 to 1852, stated that McVay never made a formal speech on the floor of the legislature, yet "no blemish rested upon his name." Garrett wrote in his "Reminiscences of Public Men in Alabama" that McVay "was more like a venerable father, with his sons around him, communicating wholesome advice -- to be fair and just to all men, and to walk uprightly."







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