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

by

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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."