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Dr. Henry Chambers

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Mohler and Carr: Dr. Henry Chambers
Madison County - Henry Chambers

SHIRLEY TUCKER MOHLER AND SUSAN CARR

Dr. Henry Chambers was born near Kenbridge, Lunenburg County, Virginia on October 1, 1790. He graduated from William and Mary College in 1808 and received his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1811. He came to Alabama shortly afterward, and as a surgeon, served in the Creek Indian Wars alongside other notable Huntsville residents who fought under Andrew Jackson.

Dr. Chambers was described as being thin with a sallow complexion and dark eyes. He was over 6 feet tall and was a member of a prosperous family. He married a young woman named Smith from Tennessee.

Dr. Chambers was a candidate for the office of governor, but was defeated twice by Israel Pickens in the years 1821 and 1823. In 1824, Chambers defeated William R. King for a seat in the Senate. But unfortunately, during his trip to Washington on horseback in 1826, Henry Chambers died en route at age 40. Somewhat ironically, he was near his original home at the time of his death and was buried in the family cemetery near Kenbridge, Virginia. He was known as a man of high morals and character, and for that reason, an Alabama county, Chambers County, was named in his honor.

Dr. Chambers was elected presidential elector in 1824. It was his job to vote, on behalf of the people of Alabama, for Andrew Jackson as United States President. It was considered a re-aligning election year. The previous presidential elections had seen a one-party government with no real opposition. In this election, the prevailing Democratic-Republican party divided as four separate candidates sought the office of president: Andrew Jackson of Tennessee, John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, William Crawford of Georgia, and Henry Clay of Kentucky.

Later, the faction led by Andrew Jackson would become the Democratic Party and the faction led by John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay would evolve into the National Republican Party, and then even later, the Whig Party.

It has been said that this election is the first in which the president did not win the popular vote, however this is hard to determine since 20% of the states did not hold a popular vote, but chose their electors to vote on behalf of the state.

The election was handed off to the U.S. House of Representatives to determine who would become president. In accordance with the 12th Amendment, only the top three candidates in the electoral vote would be considered: Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, and William Harris Crawford.

Henry Clay, who finished 4th, is reported to have said, "I cannot believe that killing 2,500 Englishmen at New Orleans qualifies for the various, difficult, and complicated duties of the Chief Magistracy." He then supported John Quincy Adams, who won the election. Jackson was later elected in 1828.

As an interesting side-note, his daughter Mary was 10 at the time of his death. She married William D. Bibb in 1835, the son of Alabama's second governor, Thomas Bibb. According to legend, she had been given oxalic acid or boric acid for her complexion by a family slave who mistook the bottle for Epsom salts. Although Mary was terminally ill as a result, she married William Bibb, but died three months later. Her mausoleum at Maple Hill Cemetery is a popular place for local schoolchildren to visit.

Another of Chambers' children, a son named Hal was living in Mississippi and represented the Confederate Congress. He got into an argument with William A. Lake and the two men decided to fight a duel in Memphis. Chambers was not quite adept with shooting a rifle, but after three days, became quite accomplished. When the shots were fired, Chambers had missed Lake's head and Lake's bullet had passed through Chambers' goatee. They decided to shoot a second time although others present tried to talk them out of it. Two hours later, the duel was re-fought and on this occasion, Chambers' bullet met its mark. Lake was dead with a bullet to his brain.

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