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Washington County - Israel Pickens

LORA McGOWAN

The ancestry of the Israel Pickens is quite interesting. Several traditions were passed down by Pickens family scholars. In the late 1600s, a man named Robert Pickens, who was probably born in Scotland, was living in France and served as the Chief Justice of the Court. His wife was a Huguenot, and when the Edict of Nantes was revoked in 1685 (see William Rufus King biography for explanation of the edict), Robert Pickens and his wife left France to settle in Scotland. Records then show that they apparently moved to Limerick, Ireland at some point. Some of their children were born there and this is where Robert and his wife died. Three sons had come to America. One of those sons had a child he named Israel.



Israel Pickens was born January 30, 1780 in what is now Cabarrus County, North Carolina. He graduated from Jefferson College in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania in 1802. He read law and served in the North Carolina Senate from 1808 - 1810 and then in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1811 - 1817. Soon after, he came to St. Stephens in the Alabama Territory where he served as the land registrar from 1817 to 1821. In 1819, Pickens was elected to represent Washington County at the Constitutional Convention.

With the death of Governor William Wyatt Bibb and decision of his brother not to seek re-election, Israel Pickens looked toward the office of governor in 1821 as a candidate of the “North Carolina Faction.” Here was a person who represented the non-elitist “everyman” against the “Georgia Faction’s” candidate, Dr. Henry Chambers, who had been a delegate to the convention from Madison County. He also felt there was a need for a state bank, as opposed to Chambers’ support of private banks. Even though Dr. Chambers had the full support of influential men like Georgia’s Charles Tait and Alabama’s John Williams Walker, Pickens won the election by just less than 2,000 votes.

Israel Pickens, the third governor of Alabama, was inaugurated on November 9, 1821. Still, he had trouble getting approval for his state bank plan because of the influence of Georgia Faction men until two other North Carolina men were elected: William Rufus King and William Kelly. In 1823, he ran again against Dr. Chambers, and once again, won by a margin of just over 2,000 votes. A banking bill was passed by the General Assembly, and a state bank opened in Cahaba in 1824.

Israel Pickens served during a very interesting time in Alabama’s history. He was the governor that welcomed Revolutionary War hero Marquis de Lafayette, even though his visit to Alabama cost Alabama \$15,715.18 and nearly bankrupted the state. Pickens was interested in science and was a member of the American Colonization Society, a group of men who wanted slaves sent to the Free State of Liberia for re-introduction into the African culture.

After his term as governor, Pickens was appointed to the U.S. Senate to fill a vacancy. He moved to Cuba for his health (bad lungs), and died near Matanzas, Cuba on April 24, 1827 at age 47. He was buried in Greensboro, Hale County, Alabama.

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