
The "Wizard of Mississippi"

As in any new state, most of Mississippi's early leaders were newcomers. Businessmen, lawyers, and speculators migrated to Mississippi. One such man was Robert Walker, who moved to Natchez from Pennsylvania in 1826. Walker went into law and speculated in plantations and slaves. Then, in 1836, he defeated George Poindexter for the United States Senate.

"A mere whiffet of a man," he weighed less than 100 pounds. His health was bad and his voice wheezy, but he was full of energy and knowledge.

Walker was always a Jacksonian Democrat. He played a large role in annexing Texas to the United States. In 1844 he helped nominate James K. Polk for president; in return, Polk appointed him secretary of the treasury. Walker was the first Mississippian to serve in a president's cabinet. During his administration of the treasury he financed the Mexican War without scandal, earning the nickname "Wizard of Mississippi." He believed in the expansion of the United States, and after Mexico's defeat he wanted to annex the entire country!

In 1857 he faced his toughest job. President Buchanan appointed him governor of Kansas Territory. Although Walker was from Mississippi and had been a slaveowner, he was determined to have fair voting in Kansas on the slavery issue. When he learned that proslavery forces had stuffed two ballot boxes, he threw out the votes.

Reaction was swift. Southern leaders called him a traitor. Buchanan, a Southern sympathizer, withdrew his support. Walker then resigned. He now knew that the argument between North and South had split the Democratic Party and threatened the Union. In 1860 he supported Stephen A. Douglas for president, but when Lincoln won he stayed with the Union. His work in Europe during the Civil War helped break down Confederate credit, defeat the South, and end the war.

He remains the foremost example of a man who got his start in the "flush times" of frontier Mississippi and went on to an impressive national career. He died in Washington in 1869.

Sectionalism Again

Very different social structures were emerging in different parts of Mississippi. As late as 1830, the plantation system had triumphed only in the Old Natchez District. To the east lay the Piney Woods, with a social structure very different from the river counties. The soil was poor, and settlers worked as herdsmen, lumbermen, and small farmers.

To the north and east, the Loess Hills were being settled and plantations were being built. Finally, separated by one hundred miles of Choctaw land, there were counties of rich land—Monroe and Lowndes—on the Alabama line.

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