

History of Perry County, Pennsylvania, Including Descriptions of Indian and Pioneer Life from the Time of Earliest Settlement Sketches of Its Noted Men and Women and Many Professional Men, By H. H. Hain, Harrisburg, Pa., 1922 - Hain-Moore Company, Publishers, Harrisburg, Pa.

Governor John Bigler, of California



Third governor of California. Born at Landisburg. John Bigler never had a photograph taken, and his cut has never before appeared in any book. This cut was made from an oil painting from life which hangs in the Governor's Room, in the California State Capitol, photographed especially for this book.

In no other instance in the annals of American history have brothers served as governors of different states at the same time, yet the talented **Bigler** family of Perry County was not content with furnishing its own state with one of its very best governors, but gave to that empire of the Pacific slope, California, its third governor, and the very first one to be elected by the people — **John Bigler**. When California became a state on September 9, 1850, Peter H. Burnett was governor, and thus became the first governor of the new state. Later he resigned and his unexpired term was filled by the lieutenant governor, John McDougal, who was the second governor. Thus **John Bigler**, the lad born on Perry County soil, became, as stated, the first governor to be elected by franchise in the new state.

John Bigler was born at Landisburg, where his father then milled, January 8, 1805, and when still in his boyhood his parents moved to Mercer County, Pennsylvania, hoping to better their financial condition, purchasing a large tract of timber land. Through a defective title they shortly found themselves bereft of all save a small farm, and it required the entire time and much hard labor by the elder **Bigler** to make ends meet. This constant toil was more than he could stand at that

period of his life, and his death followed. He left a widow and children to battle with the pioneer conditions of a newly settled country. **Jacob Bigler**, the father of **John**, had later been a miller at Gibson's mill, in Perry County, and his mother was **Susan Dock**, a sister of **Judge Dock**, of Harrisburg, Dauphin County, Pennsylvania.

The death of the father curtailed the education which the parents had planned for the children, so **John Bigler** learned the printing trade and became the editor of the *Centre Democrat*, published at Bellefonte, before 1830, and when less than twenty-five years old. He continued its publication for some years and in the meantime studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1840. It was during this period, from 1830 to 1833 that his brother **William**, who was to become governor of his native state, learned the printing trade with him.

In 1849, having in the meantime married, and became the father of a daughter, he took his family overland to California, and settled at Sacramento. At first he turned his attention to anything to gain a livelihood, doing odd jobs, unloading steamships, cutting wood and even as an auctioneer. He was quick-witted, good natured, fond of company, fluent of speech, but rough and ready in attire — just the type of man to dovetail with the then pioneer life there. He was energetic and it was but natural that politics appealed to him.

At the first election, under the Constitution of 1849, he became the Democratic candidate for the state assembly from the Sacramento district. The returns showed him to have been beaten, but he contested the election and a special committee on contested elections seated him. On January 10, 1850, he was elected speaker pro tempore of the house by a vote of seventeen to two, and on February 17, but a short while thereafter, when the speaker resigned, he was elected to the position. At the autumn election of 1850 he was returned to the legislature, and at the succeeding session was almost unanimously elected as speaker, which shows that he was not only an excellent presiding officer, well versed in parliamentary rules, but also a popular man. It was in the course of his service as speaker that he joined forces with David C. Broderick, then a political power in California, each being of great value to the other. It was largely owing to this combination that he was nominated for governor of California, shortly after the sessions of the legislature closed.

At the fall election he was elected to the highest office in the state, and on January 8, 1852, in the presence of the two houses of the legislature, he was sworn into office as governor of the "Golden State," the thirty-first one to attain statehood and a veritable empire whose shores are washed by the Pacific Ocean for a distance as great as the states on the Atlantic slope from Massachusetts to Georgia.

In his inaugural address, among many other things, he said that no state could prosper so long as its counselors were governed by schemes of speculation and private aggrandizement, and no community could flourish under the influence of a wild, vacillating and unsettled policy. California had been, perhaps, more unfortunate in this respect than any of the other states of the Union. It should be his purpose, so far as the executive arm could reach the evil, to apply the remedy. It was better, he continued, to adhere to the principles and systems exemplified in the practice of the other states, which had been sustained by time and were tested by experience, than to follow after ideal and imaginary good. In these modern days of idealism and various other isms that homely statement shines forth like prophecy. It might well be adopted by many of our modern statesmen. He said the highways which had been successfully trodden in other states might be safely and prudently pursued by California. So long as American precedents were adopted and adhered to there would be no need to blush on account of the adoption of laws elsewhere successful. He was a believer in the wisdom of the aphorism "that the fewer and plainer the laws by which a people are governed, the better." There was much truth in the remark "that danger to popular government is to be apprehended from being governed too much." Few laws, well directed, would effect more good than numberless statutes, restraining, fettering and interfering with private enterprise. The greatest liberty consistent with good government was the true principal of republicanism and would contribute most to the development of the resources and energies of a people, he said.

The capitol had been located at Vallejo, but that community had failed to fulfill its part of the conditions, and as **John Bigler** was a resident of Sacramento, it was largely through his influence that the capitol was permanently located there, as he represented that district in the assembly from the first, and while governor had a powerful influence.

Shortly prior to his term as governor — in 1848 — the first Chinamen came to California, welcomed at first, but soon found to be a menace as the ever increasing number of them was becoming a problem to the state, as it later became to the nation, resulting in the eventual passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. As early as 1849 they were already barred from some mining camps. After much attention given to legislation by the two houses **Governor Bigler** gave impetus to the anti-Chinese movement by transmitting a special message to the legislature calling attention to the immediate necessity of exclusive legislation to check immigration. The message contained much sound logic and, while legislation failed to pass then, it has long since shown its practicability.

At that time there was much overland traffic to the mining lands of California, and a commission had been appointed and had opened relief posts which the legislature had provided for by the appropriation of a sum not to exceed \$25,000. The sum was exceeded by the commission and became a matter of scandal, there being, as usual, two sides to the story. The one side claimed three thousand persons had been relieved, and the other contended it smacked more of political jobbery than of benevolence. The matter finally resulted in a duel. There was considerable fault found with **Bigler's** stand on this matter. Edward Gilbert, one of California's first congressmen and editor of an Alta newspaper, made some caustic comment which aroused the ire of James W. Denver, a state senator whom **Bigler** had appointed at the head of the commission, and his personal friend and business associate. Denver replied in a bitter communication which reflected on Gilbert's character. Gilbert immediately challenged Denver to a duel. Denver accepted and named the rifle as the weapon, as he was an expert rifleman. The duel, which was the first one between men of prominence in the state, took place in Oak Grove, near Sacramento, on August 2, 1852. Placed forty paces apart both missed at the first shot, whether intentionally or not will never be known. At the second shot the congressman (Gilbert) fell, being shot through the body. While Gilbert was a popular man no prosecution was made against his slayer, but on the other hand **Governor Bigler** appointed him as secretary of state six months later when a vacancy occurred by resignation. This act seems not to have been unpopular, either.

At the Democratic State Convention of 1853 his political partner, David C. Broderick, was in complete control, and **Governor Bigler** was renominated and, at the fall election, was reelected. Until the present century he was the only governor to be reelected, which shows that his administration of the affairs of the state must have been very satisfactory to the electorate.

In another respect than that of both becoming governors did the actions of these two brothers parallel. When **William Bigler** was a state senator of Pennsylvania it was he that stood for putting through the legislation for the building of the Pennsylvania Central railway over the Allegheny Mountains, which many claimed to be impractical, but over which line the Pennsylvania Railroad with four tracks of steel now connect New York City and Pittsburgh. When he was a member of the General Assembly of California in 1850, which was its initial session, on March 11, **John Bigler** introduced a joint resolution instructing the United States

senators and requesting the representatives in Congress to urge the importance of authorizing as soon as practicable, the construction of a national railroad from the Pacific Ocean to the Mississippi River. Later, when he was governor, in a message to the legislature he proposed the establishment of military and post roads across the plains, to connect California with the Atlantic states. It was brought up, but as California had no jurisdiction without its own bounds, the national government was appealed to by resolution to build three military and post roads across the continent. The result was that the national government took up the matter and in a short time the Atlantic and the Pacific were connected by military and post roads, which eventually grew to the great transcontinental railway lines of our time.

It was during his administration that the great and famous San Quentin prison was established in California, which to this day is a noted place of confinement for evildoers in state as well as ordinal-civil affairs and transactions. While a member of the assembly he was one of the men who helped establish a free school system, primarily patterned after the one from his native state.

In 1855 **Governor Bigler** was again renominated, but was defeated by John Neely Johnson, the nominee of the ascendant "Know Nothing" Party. This was a party formed to combat foreign immigration and was a secret alliance. It got its name through that secret method, as any one who belonged to it, when pressed for information invariably said that he knew nothing. With the ascendancy of the "Know Nothings" **Governor Bigler's** political partner, David C. Broderick, lost his prestige for a time.

Through the efforts of his brother, United States **Senator William Bigler**, the former Pennsylvania governor, he was appointed United States Minister to Chili by President James Buchanan, in 1857, and served until the advent of Abraham Lincoln, in 1861. He returned to California and was nominated for Congress, but was defeated. In 1867 President Johnson appointed him a commissioner on the board to pass upon the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad. In 1868 he established the State Capital Reporter at Sacramento, where he died in November 29, 1871, leaving a wife and daughter. He and his wife and daughter are buried at Sacramento, where the State of California has erected a monument to his memory.

Physically **Governor Bigler** was comparatively short and inclined to be corpulent, he was good-natured, jolly, and what is known in modern parlance as "a good mixer," which no doubt accounts in a very large way for his political success for many years.