

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 William Bigler.



William Bigler, Twelfth Governor of Pennsylvania. Born at "Westover" Mill, Perry County.

It is no small thing for a barefoot Perry County boy to become Governor of Pennsylvania, yet **William Bigler**, the twelfth man to fill that important position, was born in the famous old Gibson¹ mansion, in what is now Spring Township, Perry County, on December 31, 1813². His father, **Jacob Bigler**, was the miller at Gibson's mill, and his mother's maiden name was **Susan Dock**³, a sister of **Judge Dock**, of Dauphin County. They were of German descent and were educated in both tongues, not an unusual thing in those days.

When he was yet a boy, his parents in the hope of bettering their fortune, moved to Mercer County, purchasing a large tract of woodland. The title proved defective and they found themselves left with only a small farm. The matter of providing even the necessities for a large family from land barely rescued ran from the forest meant incessant toil, and the elder **Bigler** soon yielded to ill health and passed away, leaving a widow and children to wrestle with the vicissitudes of life in a newly settled community.

The children received only such an education as the common schools of the day in the rural districts afforded. **William** began learning the printing trade, and from 1830 to 1833 he was employed on the *Centre Democrat*, published at Bellefonte by his brother **John**. At the end of that period, influenced by friends, among whom was Andrew G. Curtin, later to become the great "war governor" of Pennsylvania, he went to Clearfield and began, not without misgivings, however, the publication of the *Clearfield Democrat*, a political paper. It is said of him that he

¹ At the memorial session of the Pennsylvania State Senate, March 11, 1881, **Charles H. Smiley**, then State Senator from Perry County, in his eulogy, mentioned the birthplace of the **Bigler** brothers. **Chief Justice Gibson**, **General George Gibson**, Commissary General of the United States, and **Congressman Bernheisel**, who adopted the Mormon faith and became the representative of that people in Congress, as having taken place in the same room, in the old Gibson mansion, at Gibson's Mill. This has been widely quoted, yet it had an earlier publication, as it appeared on page 259 of Wright's History in 1873. Landisburg citizens have claimed that the **Biglers**, or at least **Governor John Bigler**, was born in that town. The facts are these: **Jacob Bigler**, the father, rented the Rice mill, near Landisburg, in 1795, and did not rent the Gibson mill until 1809, from which the deduction is made that **John Bigler**, the Governor of California, whose birth occurred in 1805, was born at Landisburg, where **Jacob Bigler** resided until renting the Gibson mill. That **William Bigler**, born in 1813, was not born at Landisburg, but at the Gibson mill, is also no doubt the truth, as his father rented the Gibson mill in 1809, after the death of **Ann West Gibson**, the mother of the Chief Justice, at which time her other son, **Francis**, located in Carlisle, where he remained for many years, later returning to the old home. In an autobiography of the late **Judge Dock** he states that in 1813 he visited his sister **Susan**, married to **Jacob Bigler**, at their home on Sherman's Creek. The late **William M. Henderson**, during his life, made the statement in writing that one was born at Landisburg and one at Gibson's mill, as his parents had moved near the Gibson mill as early as 1803 or 1804, and the families were friends.

² Date sometimes given as January 1, 1814.

³ **Susan Dock Bigler**, the widowed mother, lived to see her two sons become famous, and when she died, March 16, 1854, they were both in office, as governors of widely separated commonwealths.

"had no money, but possessed about everything else requisite to the publication of a paper." Aided by friends he secured a second-hand press and some old type, and as he later said, "started an eight-by-ten Jackson paper to counteract the influence of a seven-by-nine Whig paper." He did all the work, both editorial and mechanical. He was very courteous and was a veritable backwoods-man — a crack shot and a good hunter, political accomplishments of that period.

In 1836 he married a daughter of **Alexander B. Reed**, of Clearfield, sold his paper and went into partnership with **Mr. Reed** in the mercantile line. His industry soon placed him as a leader in that line and in the lumber business, which he also conducted. From 1845 to 1850 he was the leading lumber producer in Pennsylvania, and at that time lumbering was probably the leading industry in the state.

In 1841 he was nominated for state senator from the district comprised of the counties of Armstrong, Indiana, Cambria and Clearfield, and elected by three thousand majority. Though opposed by a regularly nominated candidate of the Whigs he polled every vote in Clearfield County, save one — an unheard-of result in politics. Sessions of the State Senate at that time were devoted to matters of unusual importance. The United States Bank and the Bank of Pennsylvania, with the funds of the state on deposit, had failed and had prevented payment of the interest on the public debt, then an enormous sum. Inevitable discontent and murmurings of repudiation of the public debt followed and **Senator Bigler** was the active leader of those who stood by the integrity of the commonwealth. His principal address upon the resumption of specie payments created such a favorable impression that Senator John Strohm, of Lancaster, said: "Young man, that speech will make you Governor of Pennsylvania, if you behave yourself well hereafter."

In 1843 ne was elected speaker of the senate, the presiding officer being known by that title until the adoption of the Constitution of 1873, and was reelected, having been returned to the senate in 1844. During his second term in the senate the question of railroad communication between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh was the absorbing topic in legislative halls. Capitalists from Philadelphia applied for a charter to construct a road between the two cities wholly in Pennsylvania territory. Pittsburgh, however, contended that a direct route across the Alleghenies was impractical and insisted on granting the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Company the right to extend their right of way through western counties of the state to their city, claiming that for all time the only railroad communication between eastern and western Pennsylvania would be through the states of Delaware, Maryland and West Virginia. **Senator Bigler's** district was divided, but he pleaded for the road through the state. He did not believe the route to be impractical and had great faith in promised improvements in motive power, in which he has long since been justified. The matter was settled by a proposition which he himself advanced, that if a bona fide subscription of three million dollars was not made and paid towards the construction of the Pennsylvania Central Railroad on or before the first of the ensuing June then the act granting the right of way to the Baltimore & Ohio Company should become effective, but otherwise be null and void.

In 1848 his name was placed in nomination for governor, but he was defeated for the nomination by Morris Longstreth, then a canal commissioner, who was defeated by William F. Johnston at the polls. In 1849 he was appointed a revenue commissioner, whose duty it was to adjust the tax rate of different sections of the state. In 1851 he was given the Democratic nomination by acclamation and defeated Governor Johnston for reelection at the polls. Not only were great questions of state then involved, but the Fugitive Slave Law and the question of slavery in the

territories were leading topics. He was then but thirty-eight years old and was, until the election of Governor Pattison in 1883, the youngest governor of Pennsylvania ever elected. A curious coincidence was that his brother **John** was chosen Governor of California at the same time. His biography appears in the next few pages.

Governor Bigler's administration was characterized by the old-time virtues, insisting on rigid economy and strict accountability in the use of public monies. He took a decided stand against the pernicious practice of putting good and bad legislation in the same bill for the purpose of getting the bad measures enacted into law, and it was through his insistence that a bill was passed forbidding the passage of an act which did not fully state in its title the subject matter and which contained more than one subject. This was afterwards incorporated into the Constitution of 1874, as Section 3 of Article 3.

He was in March, 1854, again unanimously nominated, but a new party, the Native Americans, in conjunction with the Whigs, defeated him, electing James Pollock. In January, 1855, he was elected president of the Philadelphia & Erie Railroad Company, and later the same year was elected United States Senator from Pennsylvania, serving for six years. He was there while the war clouds of secession and rebellion gathered and burst in all their fury, spreading ruin throughout the land. In February, 1861, upon the senate floor he said, "as for secession, I am utterly against it. I deny the right and abhor the consequences." When Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States, **Senator Bigler** was untiring in his zeal to help adjust national difficulties, acting with Mr. Crittenden in efforts to secure a compromise. He held that the Southern states had no reasonable plea for resorting to violence until all peaceful means for adjustment had been exhausted. He was a member of the Committee of Thirteen to which were referred the famous compromise propositions and advocated their submission to a vote of the people of the several states, which was rejected, but which, it is contended by many, would have crushed secession.

He was a member of the National Democratic Convention at Charleston in 1860, and was against the nomination of Douglas. In 1864 he was temporary chairman of the National Convention which nominated George B. McClellan, whom he favored. He was a candidate for Congress in 1864, but was defeated.

In 1875 his name was placed in nomination for the governorship again, and for ten ballots he led all the candidates. His name was withdrawn and Cyrus L. Pershing, of Schuylkill, was nominated, but was defeated by John F. Hartranft at the polls. In 1876 he manifested much interest in the Presidential election, and when the result was seen to hinge on the disputed votes of certain Southern states, he, with Ex-Governor Andrew G. Curtin and Samuel J. Randall, for years a Pennsylvania Congressman, were sent to New Orleans to see that the canvass was fair. He was financial agent of the Centennial of 1876, the first national exhibition of any import.

Governor Bigler died at Clearfield, August 9, 1880. He was the father of five sons. His career was marked by honesty and ability. He was one of the statesmen of his day, and whether in official position or following the pursuits of private life his actions were distinguished for their honesty and good intent. When secession threatened, amid strife, contention and hesitation, his allegiance was unflinching and he could realize no other destiny than that which has resulted, showing the firm foundation and stability of our government — an undivided Union.

His characteristics were marked: Of sturdy character, not brilliant perhaps, but honest, intelligent and faithful to every trust. On June 5, 1858, when he was a United States Senator, a writer in Harper's Weekly said: "He is less seen and more felt than any gentleman on the administration side of the senate." His messages and public papers were always expressed in excellent English and his arguments were logical and convincing. A colleague said of him: "His greatest glory was not his ability, his statesmanship, nor the high and honorable positions which he held. They are worthy of high honor, it is true; but they fade before the brighter, stronger claims of his generous, sympathetic, unselfish nature, manifested in a long life of kindness to his fellow man."

It was the lot of **Governor Bigler** to figure in three distinct eras of Pennsylvania history: In the period of our canal system, when the revulsion of 1841 had impaired the public credit, with the project uncompleted further impairing it; later, when the railroads were threading their way and seeking to use the national highways, and still later when the railroads were built and were attempting to control legislation.

For many years he was a ruling elder of the Presbyterian Church, and after retiring from active life he said in an address that he had "a higher and nobler enjoyment in discharging his religious duties than he ever experienced amidst the honors of official life." At the eulogistic services held by the Pennsylvania Legislature, after his death, a speaker said: "If I were a teacher and some ambitious pupil whose ideas were looking forth to future fame in the service of the republic, were to ask me, 'What governor's life should I study to prepare me for the contest?' I would answer. '**William Bigler's**, for none fought the battle of life more successfully.' "

That great editor, Col. A. K. McClure, a personal acquaintance, in "Old-Time Notes of Pennsylvania," said of **William Bigler**:

"**William Bigler** became governor in January, 1852, when the conditions of trade and industry were greatly improved, giving him unusual opportunity to make a successful administration, and no governor in the history of the state could have more intelligently directed the government to the best interests of the people.

"He was born not far from the little community of Shermansdale, now Perry County, close to the home of my boyhood. It was a very primitive and sparsely settled section, but the eyes of the people always brightened when they spoke of the distinguished public men it had furnished to the country in Chief Justice **John Bannister Gibson**, Governor **William Bigler**, of Pennsylvania, and Governor **John Bigler**, of California, all of whom were in office at one time.

"**William Bigler** was elected Governor of Pennsylvania in 1851, and on the same ticket with him was **John Bannister Gibson**, then Chief Justice of the state, who was continued on the elective supreme court, and just one month before the election of **Bigler** and **Gibson** in Pennsylvania, **John Bigler** was elected Governor of California. **John Bigler** became foreign minister after serving two terms as governor, and **William Bigler** became United States Senator. It was certainly a remarkable development of the greatness achieved by these barefooted boys of Sherman's Valley.

"Pennsylvania has had governors of stronger intellectual force than **Bigler**, but I never knew a public man who had better command of all his faculties or could apply them to more profitable uses. He was a man of very clear conception and unusually sound judgment, with a severe conscientiousness that made him heroic in defense of the right. He was a man of unusually fine presence, of a most amiable and genial disposition, and delightful in companionship, but no influence or interest could swerve him from his convictions of duty in official trust.

"He was a careful student, an intelligent observer of men and events, and thoroughly mastered every question that confronted him in the discharge of his political duties. He was not an aggressive man in the general acceptance of the term, but his conservatism never restrained him in aiding legitimate progress, and no cleaner man ever filled the executive chair of Pennsylvania.

"He was a thorough forester, loved the woods, and soon learned to put something approaching a fair value upon the vast amount of fine lumber in that region. In a few years he became one of the largest lumber merchants of the West Branch, and I well remember the admiration he aroused among his political friends, when he was a member of the senate and a prospective candidate for governor, by making the entire journey from Clearfield to Harrisburg on one of his own rafts. He was well equipped for the practical duties of the gubernatorial chair. He was a thoroughly good judge of men and as thoroughly familiar with every public question relating to the interests of the state.

"**Governor Bigler** did more than any other one man in his day to save Pennsylvania from the scourge of an inflated wildcat currency. Pennsylvania had entirely recovered from the terrible financial depression of 1841 when repudiation was narrowly escaped. Commerce, industry and trade were generally quickened, and the discovery of gold in California, although then in its infancy, seemed to be furnishing an amount of the precious metal that must diffuse wealth into every channel of business enterprise. The few millions of gold that California produced in 1851 were regarded as tenfold more important than all the twentyfold of gold and silver now produced in the West. The feeling was very general that a tide of prosperity was approaching, and a deluge of applications for bank charters came upon the legislature during **Bigler's** first year.

"The legislators were fully in sympathy with the prospective tide of wealth that was dazzling the people, and they passed bank charters by the score, and all without any individual liability or security for depositors beyond the capital stock. In a single message **Governor Bigler** vetoed eleven bank charters, and during the session he sent to the senate or house thirty messages vetoing bank bills. He was thoroughly familiar with the industrial interests of the state and knew how easily the people would be tempted from the ordinary channels of industry by hope of suddenly acquired wealth, without pausing to consider that the floodtide of irresponsible banks, practically without limit as to the issue of currency, would produce a most unhealthy inflation that could end only in terrible disaster.

"He was the first governor who made an appeal to the legislature to halt what was known as log-rolling or omnibus legislation, by which a bank charter could be made an amendment to the bill for the removal of a local schoolhouse, and insisted that he should have the right to consider every different feature of legislation upon its own merits. He proposed also in the same message two amendments, which have since been adopted in our Constitution, relating to legislation, requiring each bill to contain but a single subject, and to be passed by a majority vote of each house in a call of ayes and nays.

"**Bigler** had served three terms in the senate, elected each time practically without a contest, and although he peremptorily declined at the end of his second term, and sent delegates from his county in favor of another candidate, the delegates from the other counties of the district gave a unanimous vote for him and he was compelled to continue legislative service. The prominent position he occupied in the senate had thoroughly familiarized him with all matters relating to state government, and, next to Governor Johnston, I doubt whether any man ever filled the position who was more thoroughly equipped for shaping legislation and administering the state government. His administration commanded not only the respect, but the hearty approval of his party, and even his political opponents, however earnestly they may have differed with him, held in high esteem his ability and integrity, and when he was nominated for reelection in 1854 by the unanimous vote of the convention, given with the heartiest enthusiasm, there did not seem to be a cloud on the Democratic horizon even as large as a man's hand to threaten him with the tempest that swept him out of office by nearly 40,000 majority.

"The repeal of the Missouri Compromise by a Democratic Congress aroused the anti-slavery sentiment that largely pervaded the Democratic ranks in every section of the state and brought out the first distinct murmurs of revolt, and the sudden organization of the American or 'Know Nothing' Party, with the Whig Party practically on the verge of its death throes, found a wide field with loose aggregations of both Whigs and Democrats, and these elements were adroitly combined against **Bigler** in favors of James Pollock, who succeeded him.

"It was a most humiliating defeat, and at the time seemed to bring hopeless destruction to his political career, but his defeat for governor made him United States Senator and one of the great national leaders of his party during the Buchanan administration. **Bigler's** career in the senate showed that he was equal to the mastery of the gravest national problems, and his sound judgment and conservative aims gave him great power to aid in the election of James Buchanan, his favorite candidate for the Presidency. His personal devotion to Buchanan made him resolve all doubts in favor of supporting the President in his battle with Douglas, and that led to his support of the sadly mistaken policy of the administration in the Kansas-Nebraska disputes, although **Senator Bigler** always sought to temper the desperate policy of his associate leaders. He visited Kansas personally, and in perfect good faith appealed to the Free State men to come to the front, as they seemed to have the majority, but they had been overwhelmed by the hordes from Missouri, and they refused to accept his advice.

"Taking his career as a whole in the senate, it was eminently creditable, and after his retirement he continued to exhibit the liveliest interest in all public affairs. He was one of the leading men in the direction of the Centennial Exposition, and labored most earnestly and unselfishly to promote its success. Although he never made public utterance on the subject, nothing would have gratified him so much as to have been recalled to the gubernatorial chair of the state. In 1875, when the Democratic convention was in session in Erie, and had what seemed to be an almost hopeless wrestle with a number of candidates, he was hopeful and anxious that he might be accepted as a compromise between disputing factions. He was in my editorial office waiting for dispatches from the Erie convention, and when I handed him the dispatch announcing the nomination of Judge Pershing, he accepted it gracefully, and I doubt whether any other saw the expression of disappointment that he did not conceal from me when he felt that his last opportunity had failed."

The Senate of Pennsylvania, on April 27, 1881, held a memorial session, at which a number of eulogies were delivered in honor of **Governor Bigler**, long a member of that body, and whose death had but recently occurred. Lieutenant Governor Stone presided, and among those who spoke was **Senator Charles H. Smiley**, then representing the district which included Perry, the native home of the deceased governor, and whose birthplace was within a very few miles of his.

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