

## **Johnson, James** <sup>[1]</sup>

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**12 Feb. 1811–30 Nov. 1891**

James Johnson, Georgia lawyer, congressman, provisional governor, customs collector, and Superior Court judge, was born in Robeson County <sup>[2]</sup>, N.C., the son of Peter and Nancy McNeill Johnson, whose parents had come from Scotland. Young James was among the Johnsons who moved into Henry County, Ga., newly created by the Georgia legislature's Land Lottery Act of 1821 from previously Indian-held territory between the Ocmulgee and Flint rivers. There is some reason to believe that his preparatory schooling was completed under the Reverend James Gamble, the Presbyterian who opened Henry County Academy at McDonough, Ga., in 1827.

Aided by Presbyterian educational funds, Johnson attended Franklin College (now the University of Georgia), at Athens, where he and eleven classmates, including Alexander H. Stephens and William H. Crawford, Jr., received A.B. degrees in the summer of 1832. In February of his senior year, James represented the Phi Kappa Literary Society when the Georgia Guards celebrated the centennial of George Washington's birth. His toast on that occasion revealed admiration for Edward Livingston—"An able Secretary of State, a wise constructionist, distinguished alike for his political principles, and for his social virtues."

The graduate turned to teaching school and studying law. Beginning domestic life early, he married Ann Harris of Jones County, Ga., on 12 June 1834. They and their growing family became identified with rising Columbus, the seat of Muscogee County in western Georgia. In 1842 he and Wiley Williams advertised that they would "practice law in copartnership in the Chattahoochee Circuit, and in the adjoining counties of Alabama." In 1845 Johnson and a fellow member of the Columbus bar, Henry L. Benning, for whom the modern infantry center is named, helped inspire the community to nonpartisan commemoration of the death of General Andrew Jackson. In an election for clerk of the Inferior Court, Johnson lost to a Democrat, but in practice before the Superior Court around the Chattahoochee Circuit he gained increasing notice.

Following the impact of the Compromise of 1850, Johnson ran for Congress as an antitariff Unionist and defeated the states' rights <sup>[3]</sup> candidate, none other than Benning. Though losing the next election to states' righter Alfred H. Colquitt, Congressman Johnson did sit honorably for one term (1851–53) in the U.S. House of Representatives with such conspicuous members of the Thirty-second Congress as Georgia's Alexander H. Stephens and Tennessee's Andrew Johnson <sup>[4]</sup>.

Sometimes called a Whig <sup>[5]</sup>, James Johnson in the later 1850s was attracted to the American <sup>[6]</sup>, or Know-Nothing, party. The census of 1860 credited him with real and personal property worth \$27,420. This property included thirty-one enslaved people in Muscogee County over age fifteen. Ten of them were listed as fugitives from the state. It is generally conceded that the Columbus attorney preserved a low profile during the Civil War <sup>[7]</sup>, a conflict he called a tremendous mistake. His oldest son died in 1864. Union troops did not fight their way into Columbus until 16 Apr. 1865, a week after the surrender at Appomattox.

In picking an appropriate Georgian to begin reconstruction of the civil government of the exhausted state, President Andrew Johnson <sup>[4]</sup> on 17 June appointed this conservative Columbus resident as provisional governor. A contemporary described the appointee as "a plain and unassuming gentleman of forty-five to fifty years of age, of medium size and height, who dresses throughout in black, has a regular and pleasantly inexpressive face, wears short chin and throat whiskers, and is slightly bald." Johnson's interim charge at Milledgeville, then the capital of Georgia, pleased at least the president and lasted for the six months ending 19 Dec. 1865, by which time Charles J. Jenkins had been elected governor and recognized in Washington, D.C.. James Johnson, at the president's suggestion, and Joshua Hill thereupon sought to become Georgia's first postwar U.S. senators, but on 30 Jan. 1866 the legislature preferred Alexander H. Stephens and Herschel V. Johnson. The president tendered to James Johnson the collectorship of customs for the Port of Savannah, and the Columbus attorney endured this responsibility and routine from 1 Oct. 1866 to 31 May 1869. Meanwhile he did not hesitate to write to Washington, "I could devote myself to my profession with more pleasure and profit." When eventually he did get back to the familiar courthouses of the Chattahoochee Circuit, it was to preside as judge of the Superior Court from 1 July 1869 to 1 Oct. 1875, when he is said to have resigned. By 1880, though still engaging in light legal work, he with his wife and youngest son had withdrawn to a farm on the edge of Chattahoochee County, near Upatoi, ten miles east of Columbus. His health deteriorated, ending in paralysis, yet the octogenarian outlived his wife Ann and at least half of their ten children. Information about the children, based mainly on what N. K. Rogers reported in 1933 in his *History of Chattahoochee County, Georgia*, would include mention of these Johnsons: Richard Harris, Adelaide Victoria, George F., Lucius Q., Albert Lewis, James Edward, Walter Henry, Cornelia Ann, Charles Augustus, and Mary.

The Presbyterian Church in Columbus had been so recently destroyed by fire that the pastor had to conduct Johnson's

large funeral from St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church. A long but garbled obituary was printed on the front page of the Columbus *Enquirer-Sun* for 1 Dec. 1891, and an editorial inside praised the late judge as a man of remarkable character who "although differing on the vital issues of the day with the vast majority of his people, always had their respect and esteem." The next day the paper mentioned that a committee of the Columbus bar had been appointed to prepare resolutions to be entered in the Muscogee Superior Court docket. It also noted that Johnson's body was carried to the city cemetery for interment.

## References:

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Census, congressional, and customs records (National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

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Olive Hall Shadgett, "James Johnson, Provisional Governor of Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 36 (1952).

## Additional Resources:

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