

Runnels, Hiram George ^[1]

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by J. Marshall Bullock, 1994; Revised December 2021

17 Dec. 1796–7 Dec. 1857

Hiram George Runnels, governor of Mississippi, was born in Hancock County, Georgia. His family later moved to Mississippi in 1810. His father, Harmon Runnels, had served with the Continental army in Georgia during the American Revolution ^[2]; in Mississippi, he was a member of the 1817 constitutional convention, served in the state legislature, and was one of four men officially designated to greet General Andrew Jackson ^[3] in 1818 on his visit to Jackson, the capital of Mississippi.

Young Runnels's only education was that provided by Mississippi's sold field schools ^[4]. In 1822 the legislature elected him auditor of public accounts, and he served until 1830, when he represented Hinds County in the legislature and was instrumental in securing a branch of the U.S. Bank in the state. Runnels was an unsuccessful Democratic ^[5] gubernatorial candidate in 1831 but in 1833 became the first governor elected under the new state constitution of 1832. Narrowly defeated for reelection in 1835, he was elected a state senator in 1837. As governor, Runnels was the main force behind attempts to build a new capitol, borrowing \$20,000 on his own note for its construction. The year after he left office he was awarded a contract to furnish three and one-half million bricks for the unfinished building but was later discharged from the contract.

Runnels served as president of the Mississippi Union Bank from its founding in 1838 until its failure in 1841, with Runnels liable to the bank for a sum in excess of \$200,000. He created a great scandal in July 1840, when he wounded a Jackson newspaper editor critical of his banking abilities in a duel and severely caned Governor Alexander G. McNutt, also a critic of Runnels, on a main street in Jackson. The next year, however, he was elected to the state legislature.

Runnels married Obedience A. Smith, a member of a prominent Hinds County family. They were the parents of two sons, Hal and Henry. In 1832 Mrs. Runnels was one of five people who organized the first Baptist church in Jackson. In 1842 Runnels moved to Texas, where he died in Houston. His nephew, Hardin R. Runnels, was the fifth governor of Texas.

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Additional Resources:

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