

Turner, Jesse ^[1]

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by Michael B. Dougan, 1996

3 Oct. 1805–22 Nov. 1894

Jesse Turner, pioneer Arkansas lawyer, politician, and industrialist, was born in Orange County ^[2]. His family, of Scots-Irish descent, emigrated from County Downs, Ireland, in 1750 to Lancaster, Pa., moving south to North Carolina in subsequent years. Young Jesse attended The University of North Carolina ^[3] in 1824, studying law under William McCauley. He moved to Alabama in 1830, staying but a short time before continuing on to Arkansas and settling at Van Buren in 1831.

A Whig ^[4] in politics, Turner played a major role in a political party that never elected a governor or congressman in Arkansas. Nevertheless, he was a state legislator in 1838, a delegate to the Whig convention in 1840, a visitor to West Point ^[5] in 1841, and district attorney for western Arkansas during the period 1851–54. He retired from active politics in the late 1850s, when the state Whig party disintegrated. Turning his attention to economic development, Turner was instrumental in the organization of the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad, serving as its president from 1857 until after the Civil War ^[6]. A promoter of educational betterment, he sat on the Van Buren School Board and the Crawford Institute board.

Turner led the opposition to secession ^[7] in western Arkansas. Elected to the secession convention, he forcefully opposed withdrawal from the Union from both a practical and theoretical standpoint, denying completely the legitimacy of the doctrine of peaceful secession. The firing on Fort Sumter caused him to alter his position. He voted for the ordinance while continuing to assert that he had actually supported an "act of revolution" rather than of secession. Turner played only a minor role during the Confederate period. When Federal control was extended over the state, he came to terms with the Unionists ^[8], announcing in a public letter that the war was lost and slavery must be abandoned.

His primary interest in the Reconstruction ^[9] years was the revival of his cherished Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad. However, financial problems overwhelmed the company, and Turner was forced to take a seat as vice-president in a reorganization that gave northern capitalists control of the road. He returned to politics briefly in 1866 and again in 1874 as a state senator. As a Democrat he attended his party's national convention in 1876. In 1878 he was appointed to fill an unexpired term as associate justice of the state supreme court. A much respected figure in Arkansas politics, he had "a fine commanding appearance" and possessed a library of over 1,500 books.

In 1842 Turner married Violet P. Drennen, who died the same year. In 1855 he married Rebecca J. Allen, who gave him one son, Jesse, Jr. He was buried in Van Buren.

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Authors:

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Origin - location:

Orange County ^[20]

From:

Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press.^[21]

1 January 1996 | Dougan, Michael B.

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