Thorington, James [1]

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by Ronnie W. Faulkner, 1996; Revised February 2022

7 May 1816–13 June 1887

James Thorington, lawyer, congressman, and diplomat, was born in Wilmington [2], the son of John H. Thorington, a Protestant Irishman. In 1827 he moved with his parents to Montgomery, Ala., where he attended the common schools. He was enrolled at a Fayetteville [3], N.C., military school from 1830 until it was destroyed by fire in 1832. Afterwards he entered the University of Alabama [4] at Tuscaloosa and in 1835 began to study law in his father's Montgomery office. He soon moved to St. Louis, Mo., where he was followed by the entire family. He then set out trading and trapping on the Missouri and Columbia rivers and for two years traveled the frontier, spending six months in the company of the legendary Christopher (Kit) Carson.

In 1839 Thorington returned to Missouri and the family again relocated—this time to Davenport, Iowa, where the young frontiersman set up a law practice. Elected mayor of Davenport in 1842, he served four terms (1843–47). He also was probate judge of Scott County (1843–51) and clerk of the district court (1846–54). In 1854 Thorington ran for Congress as an antislavery Whig [5], handily defeating Iowa's former Democratic [6] governor, Stephen Hempstead. Shortly after his election in 1855, the new legislator, along with other prominent antislavery Whigs, joined the Republican party [7]. This made Thorington the first Republican congressman from Iowa.

Thorington's greatest achievement in the House of Representatives was passage of the Iowa Land Grant Bill of 1856, which provided that four million acres of federal land be given to the state as an incentive for railroad development. Iowa acted quickly, making huge land grants to railroads for the purpose of developing east-to-west trunk lines. Yet this singular accomplishment was the ultimate cause of Thorington's downfall. Many resented the generous grants, especially persons in towns that were not beneficiaries of the new lines. Denied renomination, the former congressman made an unsuccessful run for the U.S. Senate in 1858. Though his national political aspirations were ended, he remained involved in Scott County, serving as sheriff (1859–63) and recorder (1864–68).

Thorington was rewarded for his strong Republicanism when President Ulysses S. Grant appointed him consul to Aspinwall, Colombia, on 21 Jan. 1873. On 27 May he was named commercial agent to the city. That June the new consul achieved notoriety for his refusal to withdraw American protection from the *Virginius*, a ship of U.S. registry charged by the Spanish with shipping arms to Cuban revolutionaries. Thorington arranged for the vessel to leave Colombian waters accompanied by the U.S. warship *The Kansas* under the watchful eyes of the crew of the Spanish gunboat *Bazan*. He was praised for "protect[ing] the Stars and Stripes in Columbian waters." Unfortunately, five months later the *Virginius* was captured in international waters near Jamaica and fifty-three crew and passengers, some Americans, were executed by the Spanish as pirates. The resulting dispute required international arbitration, with the Spanish government paying $80,000 to the families of the American victims. Thorington continued as consul until 21 Oct. 1882, when he returned to Davenport.

Thorington was active in a number of organizations, including the Odd Fellows, the Masons, and the Scott County Pioneer Settlers Society. He married Vermontborn Mary Parker and they had seven children: James, Jr. (a surgeon), Monroe P. (a soldier), Mary, Sarah, Naomi, Ella, and Jessie. Thorington died while visiting a daughter in Santa Fe, N.Mex., and was returned to Davenport for burial in Oakdale Cemetery.

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