

HISTORY
OF
JEFFERSON COUNTY
PENNSYLVANIA

*WITH ILLUSTRATIONS AND BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES
OF SOME OF ITS PROMINENT MEN AND PIONEERS*

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JENKS, HON. GEORGE A., is the youngest of ten children, and was born in Punxsutawney, Jefferson county, Pa., March 26, 1836. His father, a physician, was descended from a Welsh Quaker family, who were among the early settlers of Philadelphia. His mother was a daughter of the Rev. D. Barclay, a Scotch Presbyterian minister. When Mr. Jenks was a child his eldest brother, D. B. Jenks, who was a lawyer, was teaching him to count a hundred, and casually asked him what business he would follow when he became a man. The reply was, "Wait till to-morrow morning and I will tell you." During the night the determination was formed, and the next morning communicated by the subject of this sketch that he would be a lawyer. This purpose, so early formed, was unalterably fixed. Thenceforward his every labor and study was directed to the purpose of his life. To these early studies is largely to be attributed his capability to deal with original legal questions, such as he manifested on the impeachment of Secretary Belknap, the discussion of the Louisiana and Oregon cases before the Electoral Commission, and the debate on the distribution of the Geneva award.

When attending the common school, one of the readers then in use was the Introduction to the English Reader. In this, one of the lessons was the story of the "Noble Basket-Maker." From this story the moral was derived: That every man, no differ-

ence what his circumstances or purposes in life might be, should learn a trade. This moral he determined to act upon. When fourteen years old his father died. At sixteen he entered upon an apprenticeship of two years to the carpenter and joiner trade. When his term expired he worked at his trade, taught school, and occasionally was employed at civil engineering, till he entered college. While engaged in the latter vocation, in the spring of 1855, he assisted to lay out Omaha, in Nebraska. In the fall of that year he entered the junior class at Jefferson College, having, in the mornings and evenings, while teaching and working, steadily pursued his literary studies. He had been entered as a student of law before he entered college, and the Hon. W. P. Jenks, who was his guardian, had from early boyhood directed him in his legal and literary reading. He graduated at Jefferson College in the class of 1858, and in February, 1859, was admitted to the bar in Jefferson county, having finished his legal studies under his elder brother, P. W. Jenks.

At the September term, 1859, he led in conducting his first case in court, which was an all-important one to his clients, a widow and her minor children, whose all was their home, and that home was dependent upon the result of the case. He was opposed by the leading legal talent at the bar, including Hon. I. G. Gordon, Hon. W. P. Jenks, and Hon. G. W. Zeigler. He won the case, and thenceforward was employed in most of the important causes in his own county, and his name soon became familiar in many of the courts of Western and Central Pennsylvania, to which he was called for the trial of important cases.

When not engaged in the courts, his life has been one of constant study and preparation. He never sought public position, but was known as a Democrat. In the fall of 1874 he was tendered the Democratic nomination for Congress in the Twenty-fifth District of Pennsylvania, against General Harry White. The district was heavily Republican, but his personal popularity and the tidal wave elected him to the Forty-fourth Congress. Speaker Kerr appointed him chairman of the Committee on Invalid Pensions. A masterly report on the condition and working of the Pension Bureau, derived from an investigation by order of the House, he soon made, and followed this by a bill which was calculated to prevent future abuses. Bounty land warrants, which, before this, had been personal property, had become the plunder of a dishonest ring, which, at one single time, had seized upon over one hundred thousand acres of land, were changed to realty through his efforts, and so guarded that only the rightful owners, their legal heirs or assigns, could obtain them.

His forensic ability first became known to the House in a discussion concerning the character of an invalid pension. He had asserted that an invalid pension, for death, or disability of a soldier in the service, in the line of his duty, was a contract right. This was denied by some of the leading Republicans of the House, who alleged it was mere gift or gratuity, and a warm debate ensued, at the conclusion of which Mr. Jenks made a legal argument, tracing the legislation on the subject from and since the Revolutionary War, and establishing so conclusively the position he assumed that it has not since been denied. This was soon succeeded by a legal discussion concerning the refusal of Hallett Kilbourne to testify before a committee of the House.

The legal prominence he had already attained led the House to elect him as one of seven managers on the part of the House to conduct the impeachment of Secretary Belknap, the others being Messrs. Lord, Knott, Lynde, McMahon, Hoar and Lapham. On that trial, before the Senate, the defendant was represented by three leading lawyers

of the nation—Hon. Jeremiah S. Black, Hon. Matt. H. Carpenter and Hon. Montgomery Blair. Mr. Jenks was selected by the managers as one of the committee to draw the pleadings. He was afterwards appointed to make one of the arguments on the question of the jurisdiction of the Senate to impeach after the officer had resigned, and subsequently, in consequence of the illness of Mr. Lapham, he was selected to discuss the facts. His legal attainments were, on this trial, made conspicuous to the Senate and the nation, and conceded to be unsurpassed by any in the cause.

The subject of the distribution of the Geneva award came before the House on majority and minority reports from the Judiciary Committee. Mr. Jenks offered an amendment to the majority report; in support of the amendment and report as amended, made an argument involving some of the most difficult questions of international law. The report, as amended by him, was passed by the House.

Soon after the meeting of the second session, he was appointed by Speaker Randall one of the committee of fifteen to investigate the conduct of the elections in Louisiana, and on his return was appointed, by the chairman of the Democratic caucus, with Mr. Field, of New York, and Mr. Tucker, of Virginia, to represent the Democracy of the House in preparing, presenting and discussing the facts and the law before the Electoral Commission. It fell to Mr. Jenks to make opening arguments in the cases of Louisiana and Oregon. While he was engaged in the discussion of the first of these cases before the commission, Senators Thurman and Bayard sat side by side. Senator Bayard passed a note of admiration of the argument to Senator Thurman, and in response received the following reply: "The more I hear this man the more I admire him. He reasons like a Newton or La Place. He has spoken half an hour, and has not uttered a superfluous word." This complimentary opinion was generally concurred in by those who heard or read the proceedings before the Electoral Commission.

In most of the legal discussions that arose in the House, Mr. Jenks participated, in addition to the full performance of his duties on the very laborious committee of which he was chairman. At the expiration of his congressional term he immediately resumed his professional pursuits, in which he has ever since been engaged. His extensive practice has included almost every branch that arises in the State, and covers a very broad range of its area.

Mr. Jenks was appointed assistant secretary of the interior July 1, 1885, which office he resigned May 15, 1886, to accept the position of attorney for John E. Du Bois, the wealthy Clearfield county lumberman. He accepted this appointment, giving up his official position at Washington, in compliance with a promise made by him to John Du Bois, the uncle of his client, prior to his appointment as Assistant Secretary of the Interior, that he would take charge of all legal business for his nephew.

On the 28th of July, 1886, he was nominated as solicitor-general of the United States, and on the next day was confirmed by the Senate without the nomination being referred to a committee—a rare compliment seldom paid to any one who had not been a member of that body. When this appointment was offered to Mr. Jenks he would not accept until he had sent for Mr. Du Bois and obtained his consent, as he had promised the elder Du Bois, before his death, that he would serve his nephew and heir for a period of years, and felt that promise must take precedence over any other consideration. Mr. Du Bois cordially consented to the acceptance of the appointment, and Mr. Jenks employed Hon. W. P. Jenks to assist in discharging the duties under his contract with Mr. Du Bois. But this appointment and that of assistant secretary of the interior came to him

entirely unsolicited. He was appointed to the latter by Secretary Lamar, who had served with him in the Forty-fourth Congress, and who remembered his unusual legal ability, although he had not seen him since March, 1877, and did not even know his address, getting it from Hon. W. H. Snowdon, or ex-Governor Curtin. The first intimation he had of his appointment as solicitor-general was when the place was offered him by the president after he had summoned him to Washington by a telegram. This appointment was made by Mr. Cleveland, entirely on his own responsibility, basing his judgment largely on what he had seen of Mr. Jenks, while the latter was acting as assistant secretary of the interior, during which time he had come in contact with him frequently in the transaction of important business connected with the public lands under the direction of the interior department.

Mr. Jenks has always been an unswerving Democrat, and has been frequently honored by his party with the most important offices in their gift. His legal attainments are admitted on all sides, and that he is one of the ablest and most prominent men connected with this administration is conceded by both Republicans and Democrats.

Mr. Jenks was married, January 3, 1860, to Miss Mary Agnes, daughter of the late Thomas Mabon, one of the oldest and best-known citizens of Brookville. Of their two children only Emma survives to gladden their home. Thomas Mabon, a promising, bright boy of thirteen years, around whom clustered many fond hopes, died March 2, 1874.
