

LIVES  
OF THE  
GOVERNORS  
OF  
PENNSYLVANIA,

WITH THE  
INCIDENTAL HISTORY OF THE STATE,

FROM  
1609 TO 1873.

BY  
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## WILLIAM BIGLER,

GOVERNOR UNDER THE CONSTITUTION OF 1838.

*January 20, 1852, to January 16, 1855.*

WILLIAM BIGLER was born at Shermansburg, Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, in December, 1813. His parents, Jacob Bigler and Susan Dock, sister of Judge Dock of Harrisburg, were of German descent, and were educated, like most children of their origin, in both the German and English tongues. While very young, his parents removed to Mercer County, having purchased a large tract of wild land, in the hope of building up their fortunes; but the title proving defective, they found themselves in a short time bereft of everything but a small farm.

The maintenance of a large family from the products of land scarcely reclaimed from the dominion of the forest, aided only by young children, imposed upon the father incessant and exhausting toil. Anxiously did he labor to provide for their daily wants, and secure the means for future competence. Taxed beyond his strength, his system soon yielded to the inroads of disease, and he passed away, leaving a widow and children to wrestle with a backwoods life. Could he with dying vision have penetrated the future, he would have beheld two of his sons, for whose welfare he must have had great concern, filling the gubernatorial chairs of two of the most important States in the Union. John, the eldest son, being Governor of California, and William of Pennsylvania; and, shortly afterwards, one holding an important foreign mission, and the other a Senator of the United States.

Sorely harassed with the labor necessary for the support of the family, the boys received only the common-school

education obtainable during the winter months in a rural district; but William finally graduated from an institution well adapted to the practical development of the talents of a bright boy — that of a printing-office. From 1830 to 1833 he was employed, by his brother John, in the office of the *Centre Democrat*, published at Bellefonte. At the end of that period, influenced by the advice of his friends, among whom was Andrew G. Curtin, since governor of the Commonwealth, he decided, though not without many misgivings, to remove to Clearfield, and commence the publication of a political paper. He possessed energy, industry, regular habits, and good natural abilities; but he had no printing-press, no material, and, what was more disheartening, no money. Through the kind consideration of friends, he was enabled to borrow a sufficient sum to purchase a second-hand press and some half-worn type, and with these he started on his lonely journey, to establish, as he used afterwards in a jocular spirit to characterize it, an eight-by-ten Jackson paper, to counteract the influence of a seven-by-nine Whig paper which had preceded him into that mountainous region. Trudging along on foot behind the two-horse wagon freighted with the implements of his doubtful venture, the young man indulged in many discouraging reflections and sad forebodings of the fortune that was to await him; and when arrived at the summit of Mitchell's Hill, overlooking the town which was to prove his Mecca, his heart sank within him, and so depressed were his spirits, that he would have abandoned the enterprise, and actually proposed to the friend, Gillespie, who accompanied him, to drive back to Bellefonte with the material, and deliver it to its owners, and he himself would go West on foot. But the horses were jaded and must be fed, and necessity took them forward.

Upon his arrival, his doubts and misgivings were speedily removed; for, though he had the acquaintance of but two or three persons in the whole county, the cordial welcome which he received, and the generous hospitality extended to him on every hand, made him feel that he was among true

friends; and though he has since led a life full of honors, it is doubtful if any event in its whole course is capable of exciting so much genuine delight, as the recollection of his reception at Clearfield.

Encouraged by the light and warmth thus diffused, he bent vigorously to his task, and in a few days the *Clearfield Democrat* made its appearance. It was an insignificant affair when judged by the newspapers of a later day; but it was edited with spirit, and was devoted to the special purpose of lauding the virtues of Andrew Jackson and the policy of his school, and the discomfiture of that seven-by-nine advocate of Whiggery which was sending forth its pestilential doctrines. With the assistance of a son of Thomas Hemphill, then a leading Democratic politician of the place, Mr. Bigler wrote the editorials, set the type, worked the press, and dispatched the paper. But notwithstanding his industry and economy, and the generous assistance of friends, his income afforded him but a scanty support. He was, however, by its publication necessarily carried into a participation in the politics of the State and the nation, and he rapidly gained a reputation for sagacity, sound judgment, and above all for sincerity of purpose, which soon brought him public consideration. His kindly bearing towards even political opponents made him a favorite; besides, he was a real backwoodsman, was a good hunter, and the best marksman with a rifle in all the country,—accomplishments, which in those days by no means detracted from his influence as a political leader.

In 1836, Mr. Bigler was married to Maria J., daughter of Alexander B. Reed, of Clearfield. A native of the place, genial in manners, full of true charity and womanly affection, possessed of remarkable equanimity of mind and firmness of purpose, she was everywhere a favorite. Though making no pretensions to the accomplishments of fashionable life, she has proved herself a true lady, an affectionate wife and mother, and a devout Christian. The marriage was a happy one, and the offspring were five sons, three of whom survive.

Soon after his marriage Mr. Bigler disposed of his paper and entered into partnership with his father-in-law in mercantile business. He engaged in his new pursuit with his usual industry and energy, and in a brief period placed himself in the front rank of the merchants and dealers in lumber in that section. From 1845 to 1850 he was by far the largest producer of lumber, or square timber, on the West Branch of the Susquehanna River. But his previous active participation in politics, and his well-known views on public questions, kept him prominently before the people. He was an ardent advocate of a convention to amend the State Constitution, and was presented from his county as a delegate to that body, but he declined to be a candidate.

In 1841 he was nominated for the State Senate, and though much to his pecuniary disadvantage, he being then extensively engaged in the lumber trade, which demanded his exclusive attention, he reluctantly accepted the nomination. The district was composed of the counties of Armstrong, Indiana, Cambria, and Clearfield, and he was elected by a majority of over three thousand. Though opposed by a regularly nominated candidate of the Whig party, he received every vote in Clearfield County save one, a result unprecedented in the history of politics. In after time, as he became involved in partisan strife, many were the claimants for the honor of casting that one vote; but none could disturb the title of George Atchison, an original Abolitionist. The term of service upon which he now entered covered a period of unusual difficulty in the management of the affairs of the State. The failure of the United States Bank, and the Bank of Pennsylvania with the funds of the State on deposit, caused a stringency in monetary affairs, and prevented the payment of the interest on the public debt which was now swollen to enormous proportions. Trade and commerce were paralyzed, and the murmurs of deep discontent were heard suggesting repudiation as the only alternative. In the struggle which ensued in the Legislature upon this subject, Mr. Bigler took an active part, resisting at every step the approaches to so

base a proposal, and vindicating with great energy the honor and integrity of the Commonwealth. His speech upon the question of resumption of specie payments by the banks was received with great favor, and John Strohm, then a senator from Lancaster, approached him at its conclusion and said: "Young man, that speech will make you Governor of Pennsylvania, if you behave yourself well hereafter."

He was elected Speaker of the Senate in the spring of 1843, was re-elected at the opening of the session of 1844; and in October following was returned for a second term. Mr. Bigler did not desire again to be a candidate; and so disinclined was he to continuing in public life, that he had instructed the delegates from Clearfield to the nominating convention to withdraw his name, which they did; but the delegates from the other counties composing the district conferred the nomination on him notwithstanding, and he was elected by a vote much larger than the regular party vote.

The question of railroad communication between Philadelphia and Pittsburg came before the Legislature during his second term in the Senate, and excited absorbing interest. The people of Philadelphia, and especially the capitalists, applied for a charter to construct a road between the two cities, wholly within the limits of the State. The people of Pittsburg, on the other hand, holding that a direct route across the Alleghany Mountains was impracticable, and that the Philadelphians were insincere in their advocacy of the work, insisted on granting to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company the right to extend that road through the western counties of the State to their city, upon the theory that for all time to come the only railroad communication between the two extremities of Pennsylvania should lie through the States of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. The contest over the two projects soon became animated, attracting to the capital many influential men from all parts of the Commonwealth interested in the result. The sentiment in Mr. Bigler's district was divided, but he earnestly advocated the road through the State. He did not believe the route to be im-

practicable, and he had great faith in the improvements promised in the motive power on railroads, which has since come to be realized. The contest was finally settled by the adoption of a proposition which he himself offered, that if a *bona-fide* subscription of three millions of dollars was not made and paid towards the construction of the Pennsylvania Central road on or before the first of the ensuing June, then the act granting the right of way to the Baltimore and Ohio Company should become of effect, otherwise it should be null and void. Pending the passage of the bill, Mr. Bigler made an elaborate speech, showing the feasibilities of the route, the advantages of a road through the very heart of the State, and estimates of its prospective business. At the time these were regarded as visionary, but now appear ridiculous by their insignificance compared with what has been already realized.

At the time that the subject was under discussion in the Legislature, the people of Freeport, Armstrong County, a part of his senatorial district, not well understanding the merits of the two propositions, and believing that unless the Baltimore and Ohio Company was allowed to build, no road would ever be constructed, held a public meeting and appointed one of their number, Philip Klingensmith, a strong-minded, honest Pennsylvania German, to go to Harrisburg, and endeavor to win Mr. Bigler to the support of their views. He proceeded on his journey, had several interviews with the Senator, and finally returned to Freeport. As the canal-boat which bore him homeward neared the landing, Philip beheld the beach lined with his constituents, all eager to learn the result of his mission. Without waiting to salute them, he began to denounce the whole party, first in German and then in English, as a set of d—d fools, and enemies to their country; said that Bigler was all right, and so was he, and that, as for the Ohio company, it had better stay where it was.

In his speech, Mr. Bigler pointed out, link by link, the great feeder to the Pennsylvania road, now known as the

Tyrone and Clearfield Railroad, and which has recently been completed, mainly under his directorship. Time has thus verified his prediction, made twenty-two years ago, when the charter even of the main line had not been secured. He was also the early and zealous advocate of the Philadelphia and Erie Railroad, as appears by reference to numerous speeches, and resolutions which he supported, and by his messages to the Legislature.

In 1848, his name was presented as a candidate for Governor, and he received a large vote in the Democratic nominating convention of that year; but the choice fell upon Morris Longstreth, then a Canal Commissioner, who was defeated by William F. Johnston. In 1849, Mr. Bigler was appointed one of the Revenue Commissioners, whose duty it was to adjust the amount to be raised by taxation in the different sections and Counties of the State.

In 1851, he was nominated for Governor by acclamation, and was elected after a warmly contested canvass, by a good majority. The contest with Mr. Johnston, the opposing candidate, though conducted with courtesy and frankness, was one of unprecedented energy. It was kept up without respite from August to the day of election in October, both candidates exhibiting unusual tact and ability, and wonderful powers of physical endurance. In addition to subjects of State policy, the rendition of fugitive slaves under the Constitution and laws of the United States, and the question of slavery in the Territories, were more or less involved. Mr. Bigler unqualifiedly maintained the laws of Congress for the return of slaves, and the equal rights of the citizens of all the States in the Territories, whatever might be the character of their property, including property in slaves.

By a remarkable coincidence his own election as Governor of Pennsylvania was simultaneous with the election of his elder brother John, to the same dignity in the new State of California.

Governor Bigler's administration was characterized by many of the virtues of the old-time Governors, especially



maintaining rigid economy and strict accountability in the use of the public moneys. A system of legislation had grown up, known as "log-rolling" or "omnibus legislation," which had become exceedingly demoralizing. It was only necessary to unite a bad project with a number of good ones in one heterogeneous bill to secure its passage. In his message to the Legislature of 1854, the Governor said: "After much reflection on the magnitude of this evil—its vexatious inroads upon private rights, and its demoralizing tendency upon the interests of the people, as upon the more elevated purposes of legislation, I have determined to co-operate with the General Assembly in the application of the most efficient means which their wisdom may devise for its removal; but in the mean time, as a restraining part of the law-making power, I must beg to be indulged in claiming the privilege of considering each subject of legislation separately, and on its merits, as contemplated by the spirit of the Constitution. Henceforth, therefore, bills containing a variety of subjects of legislation, dissimilar in their character and purposes, cannot receive the sanction of the present Executive." This firm stand taken by the Governor had the desired effect. A law was passed forbidding the passage of any act which did not fully state in its title the subject-matter, and which contained more than one subject, thus breaking down forever this most pernicious system.

He resisted with a firm hand the wholesale chartering of banks, vetoing eleven such acts in one message, and sending in thirty similar messages during a single session.

His views respecting the revision of the organic law as expressed in the same message as that above quoted are notably sound and practical. "I have never," he says, "felt willing to see our fundamental law changed for light or doubtful reasons, but I sincerely believe that when the proper time arrives it will be wise so to amend the Constitution as to require that each law shall be passed in a separate bill, and receive not less than a majority of votes of each House on a call of the yeas and nays; to provide that all laws of a public nature

shall be general in their character and apply to the entire State; that municipal corporations, vested with all the power the Legislature could confer, should not have the right to become subscribers to, or holders of the stock of other corporations; to interdict the creation of debt for any purpose except war; to unite some other functionary with the Governor in the exercise of the pardoning power."

In March, 1854, he was again unanimously nominated for Governor, and entered upon another laborious campaign; but his health failed, and he lay sick in the northern part of the State during most of the canvass. He was defeated by the Native American party by a large majority. His resistance to this organization was unqualified, zealous, and determined beyond his usual bearing in partisan politics. He did himself less justice in the attitude he occupied towards the famous Kansas-Nebraska bill, which was largely involved in the canvass; for, while he accepted it as the measure of his party, it was well known that his individual judgment was against it, and that he was urgent in his appeals to Judge Douglas, who was a leading power in Congress, to adhere to his original bill, which asserted the right of the people of a territory to regulate its domestic affairs, including the right to hold slaves, but left the Missouri Compromise undisturbed.

In January, 1855, but a few days after the expiration of his gubernatorial term, he was elected President of the Philadelphia and Erie Railroad Company, in which capacity he evinced his usual energy and industry, and contributed largely to bringing its affairs to a healthy condition. He was also, in January, 1855, elected to the Senate of the United States, where he served for six years. At the end of two years Mr. Buchanan became President, and the importunities for office were exceedingly harassing—Mr. Bigler, on account of his supposed influence with the President, being charged with a large share of responsibility for the appointments. Divisions also occurred in the Democratic party upon the subject of the Kansas troubles, in which he was pitted against Judge Douglas, a man unsurpassed in tact and ability. So

solicitous had Mr. Bigler become for a settlement of this vexed question, that, in 1857, he travelled over the greater part of Kansas, urging the friends of a free State to unite in the election of delegates to a convention for framing a State Constitution, and secure a majority of members favorable to their views; but they held themselves aloof, and he maintained that they had thereby authorized those who did vote to act for them, and were bound by the result. That he acted from pure motives there can be no doubt, though his course was not vindicated by subsequent events.

When, after the election of Mr. Lincoln, it became apparent that secession would be attempted, Mr. Bigler was untiring in his efforts to secure an amicable adjustment of the national troubles. He acted with Mr. Crittenden in his efforts to secure a compromise, and held that the people of the Southern States could have no reasonable plea for resorting to violence until they had first exhausted all peaceful means for the adjustment of their grievances. In the course of an elaborate speech upon the subject in the Senate, in February, 1861, he said: "As for secession, I am utterly against it. I deny the right, and I abhor the consequences; but I shall indulge in no argument on that point. It is no remedy for any one of the evils lamented, and in my judgment it will aggravate rather than remove them, and, in addition, superinduce others of a more distressing and destructive character."

He was a member of the committee of thirteen, to which was referred the famous compromise propositions of Mr. Crittenden, and throughout sustained their adoption. He also presented and advocated a bill providing for submitting the Crittenden resolutions to a vote of the people of the several States, which was rejected, but which has since been regarded by sagacious men as a remedy which would have utterly crushed secession. He was a member of the Charleston Convention of 1860, where he took decided ground against the nomination of Judge Douglas. He was temporary chairman of the Democratic convention of 1864, and voted for the nomination of General George B. McClellan.

He was also nominated in the same year for Congress, and though defeated received more than his party vote. He was again a delegate to the Democratic convention of 1868, which met in New York.

He is at present living in retirement at Clearfield, though he has the nomination for delegate to the convention which is to meet for the revision of the State Constitution, and will doubtless be elected. For many years he has given his time and energies and much of his means to the extension of a railroad to Clearfield, and to the erection of a beautiful stone church for the first Presbyterian congregation of that place, of which body he became a member some years ago. Mr. Bigler's career has been uniformly marked by great energy and steadiness of purpose. Whatever his hands found to do he did it with his might. Ceaseless devotion to a public trust is a characteristic that has been accorded to him by men of all parties, as well as the possession of superior grasp of mind and benevolence of heart.