

J. MADISON WELLS DEAD,

Former Governor of Louisiana and
Chairman of the Returning Board
Which Defeated Tilden.

New Orleans Picayune.

In the death of ex-Governor James Madison Wells, which occurred yesterday forenoon, there passed from this earthly sphere one of the most noted characters of the history of this state. He died in Rapides parish, some twelve miles distant from the city of Alexandria. Although he had nearly covered one-fifth the distance between the ninth and tenth of those milestones that register the decades of human life, he had retained, unimpaired; almost to the very last, the great mental vigor and remarkable physical forces for which he was noted while posing as the central figure in the most exciting act that marked the closing days of that dark era of reconstruction in this state. His recent activity in looking after his personal interests is manifested in letters received here within the past week, referring to his claim against the government and other matters of his private business, but in which no reference to his being ill was made, from which the inference has been drawn that his death resulted from an illness of very short duration.

He was born in this state, on New Hope plantation, located on bayou Rapides, twelve miles above Alexandria, January 8, 1808. His father, Samuel Levy Wells, was an Irishman; his mother, Mary Elizabeth Calvit, a Huguenot. He had five brothers, Samuel L., Stephen, Frederick Calvit, Montfort and Thomas Jefferson, and two sisters, Mary and Elizabeth, every one of whom he survived. His early education was imparted to him at home by tutors, who had been especially engaged for that purpose, as was the wont of the prosperous planters in those days in providing for the educational training of their children.

As he drew near to manhood he expressed his preference for a military career, in pursuit of which, in 1827, he left his home for Middletown, Conn., where he entered Captain Partridge's military college. In that institution, such distinguished men as the late Governor Horatio Seymour of New York; the late Dr. J. P. Davidson of New Orleans; the celebrated circus man, P. T. Barnum, were classmates of young Wells. Before he was graduated, however, the college was suspended in 1828, and thence he went to Cincinnati to take up the study of law. To this end he entered the office of Charles Hammond, a celebrated lawyer of his time, and then editor of the Cincinnati Gazette.

The following year his aspirations for a legal career disappeared, and after consideration he concluded that as he had inherited land and slaves from his parents he would devote his future to planting in Louisiana. He therefore returned to Rapides parish, and was prosperous in the pursuit of his last choice, to which he devoted himself till the outbreak of the civil war.

In the meantime he had taken a greater or less interest in politics. In 1840 he was an alternate elector from Louisiana, when William Henry Harrison was returned as president of the United States. In 1856 he was a candidate for the state legislature on the whig ticket, but was defeated. Again in 1858 he suffered the same experience when the whig candidate for the state senate in the senatorial district composed of the parishes of Rapides and Avoyelles, his successful opponent having been Hon. Michael Ryan.

In the campaign of 1860 he espoused the cause of the union-democratic candidate, Stephen A. Douglass, and during the war was an openly avowed unionist. His advocacy of the cause of the union was not calculated to make his existence all that might be desired, in face of the influences, conditions and circumstances with which he was environed, and for the most of the time he was compelled to remain in hiding in the neighborhood of his hunting grounds known as "Bear Wallow," on the Calcasieu river, about twelve miles below the present site of Babb's Bridge. There he remained until the federals surrounded Port Hudson, when he set out for the mouth of Red river and sought protection on the gunboats there stationed. From that point he was taken to New Orleans, whence, after a short stay, he went to Washington, where he was accorded an interview with President Lincoln upon conditions in Louisiana.

Returning to New Orleans, he engaged in the grocery business at the corner of Magazine and Poydras streets, but as a merchant he met with no success. In 1865, when Michael Hahn was made governor of this state, Wells became the lieutenant governor. Hahn being subsequently elected to the United States congress, Wells, ex-officio, became governor. At the next election, as the nominee of the democrats, he defeated the republican candidate, Judge J. G. Tallafarro, and served as chief executive of the state until he was removed by General Phil Sheridan, whose estimate and opinion of Governor Wells are expressed both in Congressional Records and in several of the unabridged histories of this state.

When ousted from his office, the dethroned governor returned to his native parish to look after his planting interests once more, and there remained until he was appointed surveyor of port in this district by President Grant. He remained in that office during a portion of the Grant administration, until the organization of the returning board for this state, a member of which he was appointed, his colleagues being General Thomas C. Anderson, General James Longstreet and the two negroes, Louis Kenner and Gardenne Casanave. This board had existence during several campaigns, but its most memorable work was its investigation of the returns of the Hayes-Tilden election in 1876, during the sessions of which General Longstreet did not serve, and the feeling in this state was concentrated against Wells as the chairman and his white colleague, General Anderson, who, unanimously with the negroes, Kenner and Casanave, returned the eight votes of Louisiana for Rutherford B. Hayes, thus defeating the democratic candidate, Samuel J. Tilden. It was the conduct of this board, which likewise endeavored to declare Packard governor of Louisiana, that had more to do with hastening the end of negro domination in this state than anything else.

As may be well imagined, feeling against the members of the returning board ran very high. Hated by democrats and neglected by those whom he had served, Wells returned to his home once more in Rapides. From that time he has practically lived in obscurity from public life, to the extent that when, in 1890, his colleague, General Anderson, died, leading New York papers referred to Governor Wells as having died several years previously.

In 1833 he married Miss Mary Scott, daughter of Judge Thomas A. Scott of Charlotte county, Virginia. The venerable lady, ten years younger than her deceased husband, is still living. They had fourteen children, eight of whom are still living, to-wit, four boys, Mumford Wells, now residing in Grant parish; Jefferson J. Wells, living with his mother in Rapides; A. C. Wells, who lives in Texas, and Scott S. Wells, a sergeant in Hood's regiment; and four girls, Mrs. Terrell Burgess of Alexandria; Mrs. Lorette Snowden, a widow, residing on her plantation in Rapides; Mrs. E. V. Weems of New Orleans, and Miss Bessie Wells, who lives with her mother on the family plantation, where her aged father died.

The remains of Governor Wells will be brought to Alexandria to-day, and be interred in the cemetery at Pineville this afternoon. Outside of his political life, Governor Wells had many friends, and his children are all prominent in social and commercial life. As already stated, Governor Wells' mind was strong and active to the last, and one of his last letters to Mr. Weems of this city outlined an invention for turning the body of a wagon by a mere touch, the mechanism being of the ball-bearing order. He had also been devoting much of his time to pushing a large claim against the government for supplies taken during the war.