

THE GOVERNOR FROM NEW ALBANY

New Albany voters will go to the polls Tuesday, along with voters all over the country, to choose a president of the United States. And here in Indiana we will elect a governor. In 1856 – exactly 100 years ago – other New Albany voters went to the polls to elect a president and also to vote for a Hoosier governor. Buchanan became president and Ashbel P. Willard became the governor from New Albany.

Ashbel P. Willard was only 36 when he was elected governor of Indiana on the Democratic ticket in 1856. Democrats in New Albany were jubilant at the victory of this favorite son. His opponent had been Oliver P. Morton . . . later to become Indiana's famous Civil War governor. Willard's home on Spring Street was the scene of handshaking and congratulations from representatives of both parties who were proud that a New Albany resident was to fill the highest office in the state.

Willard, like most New Albanians at the time, was not a native. He had lived here only 11 years, but during that time his rise to fame had been truly remarkable. He was a native of Veron, N.Y., had studied law and later became a school teacher. In 1844, when he was teaching at Carrollton, Ky., he had taken an active part in the national election, leaving the school room to make eloquent speeches for Polk. His fame as an orator spread and Floyd County Democrats invited him here to speak.

This young man of 24 made such a deep impression during this brief visit that many of the town's leading citizens asked him to make his home here. He apparently was impressed with the growing city for the next spring he came

here to live and took up law as a partner of Randall Crawford, then one of the most distinguished lawyers in the entire state. Tradition says his first lodgings here were in the old Hale Tavern at Main and West First.

Two years later Willard married Miss Caroline Cook whom he met here and built his home – a home that many older citizens can still remember as standing where the Floyd County Junior High School is now. He made many friends in New Albany and in 1849 he was elected to the City Council. Soon he was Floyd County's representative in the State Legislature and his unmatched abilities as a speaker won him the post of Democratic floor leader. In 1852 he was successful candidate for lieutenant-governor, a post in which the whole state had an opportunity to see his talents. Then in 1856 he became Democratic candidate for governor – 11 years after he had given up school teaching.

Like Governor Craig today, he saw the need of a bridge between New Albany and Louisville and tried to make it a reality. It was Gov. Willard, knowing the overcrowded conditions in the Jeffersonville Prison, who led the way to establish a second prison at Michigan City. His efforts also led to expanded care for the mentally ill, the blind and the incurable. Gov. Willard delivered the address of dedication when the Floyd County Fairground was opened on Charlestown Road.

But then, in the midst of his triumphs, tragedy struck. Three months before his term was completed, Willard died of tuberculosis, the first Indiana governor to die in office. On October 10, 1860, the day his body was returned home for burial in Fairview Cemetery, the entire city was plunged into gloom. The church bells tolled continuously from noon until five, all business was suspended and buildings were draped in mourning. The funeral procession extended in a solid line from State to Silver Streets as New Albany paid final tribute to this man who rose to fame while living here.

A portrait of Willard painted by George Morrison hangs in the State House today – a portrait of one of New Albany's most illustrious citizen as by one of New Albany finest artists . . . a portrait of a man the city can call her own . . . Ashbel P. Willard, the governor from New Albany.

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