

John Tanner: Limestone's only Vice Presidential nominee

By Rebekah Davis

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It was a presidential election for the books, one of only four in American history in which a candidate won the popular election but lost the presidency in the Electoral College. But this was no 2000 race battled online and on the airwaves; this was 1888, Alabama was a blue state, and one Vice Presidential nominee hailed from Athens, Alabama.

John Thomas Tanner, Limestone County's first and only Vice Presidential nominee, was not red or blue, however, but "dry." A die-hard teetotaler, Tanner was nominated for Vice President of the United States at the Prohibition Party's convention in Indianapolis in June, 1888. He "received a flattering vote" from the 1,029 delegates assembled in Tomlinson Hall, but ultimately lost the nomination to John A. Brooks. Brooks and Clinton B. Fisk, who was nominated for President unanimously, went on to gather nearly a quarter million popular votes as the prohibition movement gained steam; however, that was not enough to hang in there with incumbent Grover Cleveland, who won the popular vote, and Benjamin Harrison, who took the presidency with the Electoral College vote.

For Tanner, the road to Vice Presidential candidate was the culmination of several years of campaigning for prohibition in a time when Limestone County was anything but dry. Tanner led in the organization of the Alabama State Temperance Alliance in 1881 and was chairman of the first convention of that political party. In 1884 he was appointed a delegate to the national convention in Pittsburgh where he placed John P. St. John in nomination for the presidency of the United States. Two years later Tanner himself was nominated for governor of Alabama on the Prohibition ticket. Although he distinguished himself as a powerful and sincere candidate in the cause of temperance, he lost the race.

In 1888 alone, not only was he put up for Vice President, he was elected a vice president of the National Temperance Society and simultaneously served as chairman of the executive Committee of the Prohibition Party of Alabama.

While Tanner may not have gone far on the national stage, Athens and Limestone County owe him a great debt of gratitude for the early history of Athens he compiled in a series of articles in 1876. In it, Tanner writes of a time when Athens was practically a Wild West town, with bar brawls spilling into the dirt streets. When you read it, you can almost hear Johnny Cash singing about "Kicking and a' gouging in the mud and the blood and the beer."

Tanner was born in Madison County on August 25, 1820, the son of Samuel Tanner, a Virginian who had migrated to North Alabama in 1818. Tanner must have learned much about business and politics from his father, who was the first mayor of Athens. At the age of 13 Tanner began clerking in his father's general store and from that time until his death, June 15, 1899, he was engaged in various types of business enterprises, most notably helping to organize the North & South Railroad that later became the Louisville & Nashville Railroad.

You can learn more about Tanner, as well as about the colorful first days of Athens, by picking up a copy of his "Early History of Athens" at the Limestone County Archives. That book and R.B. McClellan's "Early History of Limestone County" are just \$5.00 each and would make great Christmas gifts for the history lover on your list!

*Some information taken from W. Stanley Hoole and Addie S. Hoole's introduction to "Early History of Athens."

About the Archives:

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