

decent man who was less a shaper than a creature of circumstances.

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PHILEMON DICKERSON (June 26, 1788-December 10, 1862), the twelfth governor under the constitution of 1776, served only one year in the office, from the fall of 1836 to the fall of 1837. Although he was involved in state politics for many years, he spent his entire political career under the shadows of his older brother Mahlon (who served as governor, United States senator, and secretary of the navy) and the two leaders at the center of real power in the New Jersey Jacksonian party, Garret D. Wall and Peter D. Vroom, Jr. Philemon Dickerson, in fact, attained the governorship only when Vroom, in poor health, declined election by the Democratic legislative majority to a seventh one-year term.

Philemon and Mahlon Dickerson were among those attracted to the Jacksonian cause from the ranks of Jeffersonian Republicans. They were somewhat exceptional, since most New Jersey Jacksonian leaders had been notable Federalists. The Dickerson brothers entered the Jacksonian movement during the presidential campaigns of 1824 and 1828 primarily out

of personal hostility to John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay. They were to be influential in the Jacksonian party until the late 1830s; the decline of their influence would coincide with the beginning of a long period of Whig dominance in the state.

Philemon Dickerson was born at Succasunna, in Morris County, a descendant of the Philemon Dickerson who had been part of the great Puritan migration to Massachusetts Bay in 1638. The earlier Philemon left Salem, Massachusetts, for Southold, Long Island, in 1672. The founder of the New Jersey branch of the family, Jonathan Dickerson, moved from Long Island to New Jersey in about 1745.

Philemon Dickerson received a classical education at the University of Pennsylvania and studied law in Philadelphia at the instigation of Mahlon, eighteen years his elder. In 1813 he received his license to practice law in New Jersey, established a law practice in Paterson, and married Sidney Stotesbury, daughter of Colonel John Stotesbury of New York. He became a counselor-at-law in 1817 and a sergeant-at-law in 1834. He served in the state assembly, 1821-22.

Dickerson saw the Jackson party in New Jersey in the 1830s as a true embodiment of Jeffersonian principles, particularly in the causes of limited government and a balanced program favoring both industrial and agricultural development. Yet, like most New Jersey politicians, he considered a protective tariff and internal improvements, such as the Camden and Amboy Railroad and the Morris Canal, necessary and beneficial.

The Dickerson family's interest in iron mines near Succasunna and its close identification with the commercial life of northeast New Jersey created some antagonism among Jacksonian "agrarians" in the southern and western parts of the state who were not so firmly protectionist. Despite these differences and the ambiguity of President Jackson himself on the tariff and internal improvements, Philemon Dickerson remained loyal to the general and to his successor, Martin

Van Buren. He distrusted the "unprincipled" leadership of the opposition Whigs, claiming they promoted no program at all. Elected to two terms in the United States House of Representatives in the mid-1830s, he supported the Jacksonian program straight down the line.

When Vroom declined the governorship in the fall of 1836, the Jacksonian majority in the legislature, seeking to replace him quickly with a man of proven loyalty, turned to Dickerson, and he resigned his seat in Congress to accept the position. His term as governor was filled with acrimony and party warfare. Growing economic troubles, culminating in the Panic of 1837, combined with President Van Buren's personal unpopularity to depress the party spirit of New Jersey Democrats and stimulate a new Whig challenge for dominance in the state.

Under the 1776 constitution, many appointments to local and state office were made by a joint meeting of the council and assembly, with each member having one vote. The Whigs, who had the majority in the council, were determined to prevent the Democratic majority in the assembly from controlling the appointments, but they realized that public opinion might be unfavorable if they blocked the joint meeting. They initially seemed to hope that they could make some kind of deal in advance of the joint meeting to share the offices with the Democrats, and soon after Dickerson's accession as governor they advanced the unprecedented claim that the council's voice in the joint meeting should equal the assembly's because the legislature consisted of two equal bodies. The two sides reached no agreement, and the Whigs on the council prevented a joint meeting. State and local officeholders whose terms were to end during this legislative sitting hesitated to act since their authority was so questionable. The new counties of Atlantic and Passaic, created in February, were without either administrative or judicial officers. Neither side would give in; on March 16, 1837, the legislature adjourned without having held a joint meeting.

Governor Dickerson called a special extra sitting on May 22, ostensibly to deal with the "existing 'public exigency' and devise measures for relief." But the only accomplishment of this sitting was a joint resolution authorizing the state treasurer to borrow up to \$15,000 for state debts incurred during the expansionist period of easy money; other relief bills were victims of the impasse over the joint meeting. The Whigs, who had controlled the council eight to six during the earlier sittings, lacked a council majority because one of their councillors was ill and another was "held up." Since Governor Dickerson could break the six-to-six deadlock in the Democrats' favor, the Whig councillors had only one remaining weapon: they would have to walk out and leave the Democrats without a quorum. These circumstances led to an unvarying daily routine. The Whigs would propose relief measures, and the Democrats would vote them down. The Democrats would then raise the assembly's joint meeting request; the Whigs would move to table it, lose, and stalk from the chamber. The Democrats had tied the two issues together: they refused to consider relief measures until the Whigs allowed a joint meeting without any deals.

The parties accused each other of disgraceful conduct and blamed each other for the lack of relief measures. Governor Dickerson's administration and the Democrats suffered most, though; they took the brunt of public blame, and when the fall election of 1837 put the Whigs firmly in control of the state legislature, Philemon Dickerson was turned out of office.

Dickerson's short and inconclusive term as governor was but a prelude to other political troubles. Along with four other Democrats and one Whig, he was elected to the United States House of Representatives for the session of 1839-41, but the "Broad Seal War" delayed his taking office for a year and a half. The strength of the parties in the House was so even that control depended on the makeup of the New Jersey delega-

tion. The Whigs made charges of illegal voting and Whig Governor William Pennington rejected returns from two townships and certified the Whigs' entire slate with the great seal of the state. The House overruled this action on July 16, 1840, after a bitter partisan battle, and seated the original winners. But Dickerson's second congressional career was not noted for important activity.

Beset by continued Whig attacks on the Democrats' economic policies, Dickerson was defeated for reelection to Congress in 1840. He had seen a chance to leave the unhappy atmosphere of the House even earlier, when the United States judge for the District of New Jersey, William Rossell, died. He pressed President Van Buren for the appointment. But the president, anxious to preserve the slim Democratic House majority in the climax of his fight for the independent treasury, would agree to the appointment only when Mahlon arranged to come out of semi-retirement and hold the judgeship for Philemon until after the election. In March 1841, Mahlon yielded the judgeship to his brother.

Philemon had a rewarding career on the federal bench from 1841 to his death. He approached the work with enthusiasm, dignity, and self-conscious impartiality. The volume of work was small until the Civil War, when a large number of constitutional questions piled a heavy load on the court. Dickerson's health broke under the strain, but he remained on the bench. He died at Paterson on December 10, 1862.

Dickerson was involved in no precedent-setting decisions on the court but was popular with the bar and with other judicial officials. He remained a leader in state Democratic party councils until the growing sectionalism of the 1850s pushed his sympathies toward the Republicans. He took a great interest in the affairs of Paterson; he was instrumental in procuring its city charter in 1851 and wrote *A Lecture on the City of Paterson, Its Past, Present, and Future . . .* (1856). His second son, Edward Nicoll Dickerson, became a prominent member of the New

Jersey bar, a scientist, and an inventor.

For two decades Philemon Dickerson was an important figure in the politics of New Jersey. He was not a kingmaker at the center of political power, and much of his career was adjunctive to that of his more influential brother; still, he helped build the party system in an era of transition.

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W. Robert Fallow



WILLIAM PENNINGTON (May 4, 1796-February 16, 1862) was born in Newark, the son of Phoebe (Wheeler) and William Sandford Pennington. After attending Newark schools, he earned a degree from the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) in 1813 and then studied law with Theodore Frelinghuysen. In 1817 he was admitted to the bar, and he began to practice in his native city. Pennington became a licensed counselor in 1820 and a sergeant-at-law in 1834. Between 1817 and 1826, during the judgeship of his father, he served as clerk of the federal district and circuit courts in New Jersey.

William descended from a long distinguished line. His father was the grandson of Judah Pennington and the great-