

TENNESSEE GOVERNOR AUSTIN PEAY  
NATIVE OF CHRISTIAN COUNTY, KENTUCKY

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The Athenaeum Society

April 3, 1986

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The fact has oft times been stated, and is here repeated, that anyone or anything of value has a connection with Christian County and Hopkinsville. Would you allow the speaker one more opportunity to prove that point?

Twenty-eight miles south of Hopkinsville an institution bears the name of a prominent native son of Christian. He was born in this county, practiced law in our county seat, and to this day has a number of relatives living in the community. This man was elected an unprecedented three times to serve as Governor of Tennessee and he is remembered for bringing about reform in state government, for upgrading the state public educational system, for the development of the Great Smokey Mountains into a national park, and for making a great reduction in the state debt.

Austin Peay, Governor of Tennessee, 1923-1927, was born in south Christian County, east of Garrettsburg in what is now the Ft. Campbell Military Reservation, on June 1, 1876, at "The Oaks," the 500 acre farm of his father, also named Austin Peay. His grandfather, also named Austin Peay, had come from Virginia to settle on the place in 1835. Perrin states that the elder Peay "devoted his life to the prosecution of his farming interests, and was a man of substantial worth to the community, being a man of sound judgment and of practical business proclivities, and was universally looked upon as one possessing great strength of mind, and his life was an active one, commanding the respect of all."

Austin Peay, the future governor's father, was born in 1844, and was preparing to enter the University of Virginia when the noise of war and the sound of battle was heard. Though very young, only 17, he enlisted at the opening of the war, in the First Kentucky Confederate Cavalry and served under the command of Col. Ben Hardin Helm. At the expiration of the twelve months enlistment, he went into the Second Kentucky Cavalry, commanded by the colorful Col. Thomas G. Woodward of Christian County, and after his death by Maj. Tom Lewis. The private from Christian County rode behind General Nathan Bedford Forrest, "the wizard of the saddle," for the remainder of the war. Chickamauga and Missionary Ridge were places he never forgot because of the cold, hunger, and lack of clothing.

Returning home after the war to devote his life to farming and politics, Austin Peay married Cornelia F. Leavell, a daughter of Livingston L. Leavell, a prominent farmer who lived in Hopkinsville. Cornelia had been born and reared in the Leavell Homestead, a handsome Greek Revival landmark home which stood east of the Pioneer Cemetery and facing Bethel Street. The Confederate veteran served as Magistrate of the Garrettsburg Precinct for twelve years and he represented Christian County in the State Senate from 1884 until 1888. Senator Peay was a member of the Longview Masonic Lodge and the Salem Baptist Church and was a staunch Democrat.

The future governor attended a one room country school and for a time he was a "scholar" in the neighborhood private academy. He attended Washington and Lee University for one year and being a shy boy he found this school to be too far from home.

Nearer home at Danville, Kentucky, he went to Centre College the next year to find more of the home atmosphere of Kentucky at the smaller university. He became a member of the Kappa Alpha Fraternity and so dear was the peaceful campus that to his death he carried in half-shy sentiment the old key to his room at Centre. He graduated from Centre in 1896.

In the spring of 1896 Austin Peay was admitted to the bar in Hopkinsville. He opened an office here and practiced law a few months before moving to Clarksville. Sometime earlier he had met Sally Hurst, the daughter of a Clarksville businessman. Young Peay had his license to practice, a small law library, and his deep and abiding love for the Clarksville girl. He borrowed \$75 from an old Hopkinsville banker, married the young lady, and moved to Clarksville.

For six years, Austin Peay worked at his law practice with the steady determination which characterized everything he did. In 1902, the first stirrings of that call to public service were shown. He was elected to the House of Representatives of the Tennessee Legislature as the member from Montgomery County. Austin Peay served two terms in the legislature, studying state problems and grasping a vision which was later to lead the state to a new idealism and a new progress. Keen for public service, he consented to become chairman of the Democratic state executive committee at a time when the supremacy of the Democratic party was being seriously challenged for the first time in half a century.

Returning to Clarksville, Austin Peay resumed his law practice. At thirty, he had already made his mark on the state.

His practice grew so large that it seemed possible that he might be financially able even sooner than he had expected to make the sacrifice of holding the governorship, an honor held by many Tennesseans but always at financial loss. In 1918, the time seemed to have come.

Ten years or more before this, there had begun an intermittent warfare between the legislative and the executive branches of state government. Governors had been unable to set up much control over state finances or to cope with legislative extravagance. The Legislature appropriated boldly but it levied taxes timidly. There was a deficit during almost every year from 1907 to 1918 and this condition Austin Peay proposed to cure by appealing to the people for a sane Legislature which would reduce expenditures.

Public support initiated his candidacy for Governor in the Democratic primary of 1918. His opponent was Albert H. Roberts, of Livingston. Roberts polled 64,191 votes, while Peay mustered 51,971. That fall, Roberts was elected over the Republican nominee. His proud spirit stricken by his defeat, Austin Peay returned to Clarksville to again plunge into his law practice.

Four years later public support called again. On March 6, 1922, from his home in Clarksville, Austin Peay announced for a Democratic nomination for governor, subject to the primary of August, 1922. Drawing opposition from three candidates, former Governor Benton McMillin, Gen. Harvey H. Hannah, and L. E. Gwin, Peay won by a majority of about 4,000 votes. He faced Governor Alfred A. Taylor in the general election. On the Ides of November, 1922, Austin Peay was swept into the Governorship, then a two-year term, by a majority of almost 40,000 votes. He was inaugurated on January 16, 1923.

The candidate for governor who had stressed tax reform, completion of the long-delayed state highway system, the lengthening of the public school term, and the need to reduce government expense now had the opportunity to provide reform leadership when the state legislature met right after his inauguration.

His administrative reorganization bill gathered sixty-four scattered and separate governmental bureaus and re-grouped them under eight heads. It made it possible for the state to live within its income and avoid deficits, by reducing expenditures and creating a state budget system. The eight departments included education, highways, insurance-banking, labor, institutions, finance-taxation, agriculture and public health. The bill, after a hard fight, was passed in both houses by a large majority.

The supreme test of Peay's credibility came when he asked the Assembly to enact a law placing a small privilege tax on the net earnings of corporations. This excise tax was passed as was a gasoline tax of two cents per gallon to replace the revenue lost by the reduction of the state tax on land. The building of highways now actually started on a grand scale. The effect of the improved administration of state government was soon seen, as a large surplus began to pile up and the state was able to pay off \$1,000,000 on the state debt. This session of the legislature also saw successful motivation of Governor Peay's idea of saving Reelfoot Lake, a natural fish hatchery and a sportsman's paradise.

In the Democratic primary of 1924, Governor Peay was opposed for the Democratic nomination by John Randolph Neal and was renominated by a majority of almost 100,000 votes. He handily defeated the Republican nominee, Capt. T. F. Peck in the November election by a majority of 44,000. Oath for the second term was administered on January 19, 1925.

Milestones of the second term included a tobacco tax bill which made possible the general education bill. This bill brought eight months' minimum school terms to every county, higher salaries for teachers and cheaper textbooks. The 1925 term also enacted into law the establishment of a park in the Smokey Mountains and the formation of a game preserve at Reelfoot Lake. More attention was given to the highway building program and to the improvement of public health services.

These measures were dwarfed in the eyes of the world by a bill which slipped through the Legislature almost unnoticed until after passage by both houses and had gone to the governor for his signature. It was the celebrated Tennessee anti-evolution law, known all over the world as the "monkey law."

Four years of the Peay Administration had brought the payment of one and a half million dollars on the state debt and the tax rate had been cut about a third. All the expansion and improvement programs were being made without a great bonded debt. This had been accomplished by the excise tax, the tobacco tax, and the gasoline tax.

In June, 1926, Austin Peay became a candidate for a third term. Opponents were Hill McAlister and Dr. John Randolph Neal. The Governor was again renominated, this time by more than 8,000 votes. In the general election he was opposed by Walter White and Peay won by almost 40,000 votes.

The 1927 Legislature enacted the tobacco tax as a permanent policy to fund public education and appropriated five million dollars for the building of eight bridges to span the main rivers of the state. At the close of the session, the Legislature passed

a general appropriation bill which voted each member a bonus. Governor Peay promptly vetoed it in one of the most vigorous messages of his career. "Your extravagance has made me sick and it will make the people sick," the blunt-spoken Governor told the group in a message that rang through the state like the chime of the Liberty Bell. When the Legislature passed this treasury grab over his veto, Governor Peay went into the courts to fight it and the state supreme court ultimately held with him, though he had since died and his family had carried on the suit. During the legislative session Governor Peay had suffered influenza which developed into pneumonia.

The Governor never fully recovered his health. On Sunday afternoon, Oct. 2, 1927, as he rested at the executive mansion, he was stricken with a cerebral hemorrhage and died three hours later. After a largely attended funeral, he was buried in Greenwood Cemetery, in Clarksville.

Among the tributes which appeared in the press, perhaps one of the most meaningful came from his long-time friend, James I. Finney, editor of THE NASHVILLE TENNESSEAN, his chief journalistic supporter: "Austin Peay was no ordinary man. In many respects his career is without a parallel in the history of a state whose history is replete with the great achievements of its distinguished sons. His record is written in the story of the most progressive period of the state's history. In his broad and statesmanlike vision, the Governor embraced every interest that would contribute to the advancement of the people that he loved so devotedly."

And so the life of another man whose beginnings originated in Christian County is reviewed. May we all gain insight and better understand for the living of our own lives.

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