



BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
OF
HONORABLE OSSIAN B. HART

LATE GOVERNOR OF FLORIDA, 1873



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This sketch was prepared, by request, for the publishers of the National Cyclopædia of American Biography (James T. White & Co.), an extensive work containing sketches of all the noted men of our country, including the Governors of each State; and as only a very small part of it could be used for their purpose, the writer, who had been at considerable trouble to gather the facts presented, thought it worth while to preserve it entire in this form as a tribute to one every way worthy to be thus remembered, trusting there are still living some of Governor Hart's friends and associates who will read with interest and indorse the truth of this memorial of his life and character.

E. F. R. C.

Ossian Bingley Hart, the first and only Republican governor of Florida to this date—1901—was born in the city of Jacksonville, Jan. 17, 1821. His father, Isaiah D. Hart, was a native of Virginia and was the son of William Hart, who belonged to an old English family, and Elizabeth Streetman Hart, who was a native of Pennsylvania, but who was brought up in New Jersey, where they were married. They were both intelligent, refined and well-to-do, as most of the early settlers of Virginia are known to have been. They settled soon after their marriage in Burke county, Georgia, where they prospered; but in 1801 they moved to Florida, where they were less fortunate. He was a saddler by trade, a neat and exact workman, and was noted for the handsome saddles he made. They had twelve children, of whom Isaiah was the eighth. William Hart was a Whig, and in Florida found many old Tories, who were always unfriendly to him. During the disturbances caused by the encroachment of the United States on the Spanish claims his property was destroyed by the Spaniards, for which loss indemnity has since been paid to his heirs by the United States government.

Isaiah David Hart married Nancy Nelson, also of Virginia. Her family claimed near relationship to Lord Nelson. The dates of their births and marriage are not available, but they settled early in the last century first on the south bank of the St. Mary's river, in Florida, and in 1821, the year Gov. Hart was born, moved to the St. Johns, where Mr. Hart bought a large tract of land and laid out a town which he named Jacksonville after Gen. Andrew Jackson, at that time the military hero of the

South, who was fighting his daring battles with the Seminole Indians. He built the first house in Jacksonville, which was a large, double log-house, in the principal street of the embryo city, and opened a village store, which he kept personally for some years, but had also a large plantation, with many slaves to look after. He was a man of strong mind, great enterprise, influential and liberal in his dealings with the people who joined him in the building up of the city. He gave to the city a large plot of land for a park, which is the beautiful St. James Park, now called Hammond Park, after a recent donor of gifts to the city. Like his father, Isaiah D. Hart was a Whig in politics, and during the growth of the city he filled every public office of importance until his death in 1861. The shadow of civil war had then already fallen upon the city and State he loved, and the foreboding of ruin, not only to his own hopes and property, but to the prosperity of his beloved Southland, is thought to have hastened his death. His remains rest with those of most of his family in an odd brick mausoleum erected by him in the early days of his residence in Jacksonville, on one of his city plots, where it still stands, but falling into decay for lack of care, nearly all of his descendants having passed away with him from earthly scenes. He had eight children, four sons and four daughters, all but one living to maturity, but none attaining the age of their father. Some of the streets of Jacksonville still bear the names of his children as given to them by him at the laying out of the city—Laura, Julia and Ossian, the latter having been changed to Ocean.

Ossian Bingley was the second son of Isaiah D. Hart. His early life was contemporary with that of the new city, and in the lack of record of how his childhood and youth were passed imagination can supply the picture. An active, inquiring lad, watching with keen interest the work of his father in clearing and improving his land and laying out the streets of a city, going back and forth from his village home to the plantation, where the family spent much of their time, playing with the negro children of his own age, and forming attachments to them that lasted to their benefit till long after they became freedmen. When he was about sixteen years old, his father, who had an especial pride and ambition for this son, sent him to

Washington, D. C., to be educated. On his return to Jacksonville in his early manhood he chose the profession of law as his business, and devoted his time assiduously to the study with the best instructors available at that time in Jacksonville, and in two years was admitted to practice. His character even then was pronounced above the average of the young men of his day and locality—the elements of earnest devotion to high ideals, strict integrity, unsullied purity of heart and life, with an unselfish interest in the advancement of his native city and State, not being marked characteristics in the general young manhood of the South at that period.

In the winter of 1841 he made the acquaintance of the young maiden who was to share the vicissitudes of his future life. Catharine Smith Campbell, a New Jersey girl, daughter of Abner Campbell, of Newark, N. J., two years his junior, who was sojourning for the benefit of her health with a great uncle in Jacksonville, won his heart, and after a correspondence of two years they were married at her father's house, Oct. 2, 1843. The young husband, by diligent attention to his profession, had gained a footing among his compeers at the Bar, and by patient economy had managed to provide a neat, comfortable home for his bride; but, having become enthused with the charms of the Indian river country, he had taken up a government grant of land near Fort Pierce, and, fascinated by visions of the free life of a Southern planter in a region beyond the reach of frost, which he thought would be favorable to the delicate health of his wife, he persuaded her to consent to try it with him for a few years.

So, soon after their marriage, they left Jacksonville, with provisions for two years and a little furniture, to make a home in the unknown fair-land of their dreams. With two or three other young couples they made the journey in a small schooner, and landed near Fort Pierce, an old military post during the Indian war. They took possession of the log-houses standing there, expecting to occupy them till they could locate and build for themselves; but they had lived thus for only ten days, when a fire deprived them of even this shelter, and they found themselves homeless and almost destitute of food or clothing, two hundred miles from the nearest town. After

this and subsequent discouraging experiences, they embraced the first opportunity to go to Key West, where they met kind friends among the residents, one of whom encouraged Mr. Hart to go back and persevere in his intention to secure a claim to the section he had chosen, offering to aid him financially. Accordingly, they returned to the wilderness and remained three years, enduring many privations and hardships, but, by clearing and cultivating the land, established a claim to its ownership.

While there, in 1844, Mr. Hart was elected by the few voters in St. Lucie county to represent them in the State Legislature. The two political parties at that time were Whigs and Democrats. Mr. Hart, following the bent of his father and grandfather, was a staunch Whig, which party was in the minority in the South, so that his election was the result of his personal merits rather than of his political views. With great reluctance he left his young wife in their rude home, with only the protection of the nearest neighbor, to serve his county in the State councils at Tallahassee. At the close of the term he returned to Indian river and continued his efforts to improve conditions; but, finding the difficulties and discouragements too great for his own and his wife's physical strength, after three years of trial, they sought a more comfortable and congenial home in Key West. Here they resided ten years, Mr. Hart resuming the practice of his profession and gaining a desirable reputation as an able lawyer and a true patriot.

In 1856 he removed to Tampa, where he was living at the time of the breaking out of the Civil War in 1860. The death of his father, in 1861, obliged him to go to Jacksonville to look after his affairs, and the increasing troubles of the times compelled him to remain in and about the city for some months. His brothers and sisters, with the family servants, were carried to the plantation for safety, and he shared, with his brothers and brothers-in-law, the difficult task of protecting and providing for this large household, besides having the constant anxiety and care for his lonely wife and two little adopted daughters at Tampa. The experience of those stormy four years called for the utmost courage and discretion. From the first outbreak of the disunion element, though a native Southerner, born and bred in the environment of slavery,

he took a firm stand against secession, and consequently drew upon himself and family persecution and disaster enough to have crushed the spirit of one less brave and determined; but, undaunted by taunts and threats, he remained loyal to his country's flag to the end of the strife. In January, 1864, he was conscripted by the Confederate officers to serve in the Southern army, but was exempted by a physician's certificate of disability.

At the close of the war he removed his residence to Jacksonville, and took an active part in the reconstruction of the State government and the rebuilding of the damaged city. It was no easy task for him to hold his own in the face of the bitter contempt and opposition of those who counted him an enemy to the South because he had refused to join them in their efforts to set up a separate government; but there were others of his old personal friends who, though not wholly in sympathy with his Union sentiments, respected the honesty of his motives and his life-long devotion to the best welfare of his native State. In 1865 he writes: "Having lived for four years upon a bed of hot coals and come out without flinching from my attachment to the Union cause, I now have many friends who insist that my prospects are very bright. But I know that I can depend more upon my own business efforts in the courts when they get going again than upon any official position." But his popularity with the best element of the political leadership grew as the war spirit subsided and calmer judgment took its place, and in 1868 he received the appointment of associate judge of the Supreme Court of Florida, an honor which he keenly appreciated, and the duties of which office he discharged with conscientious fairness and fidelity. In the resolutions passed after his death by his associates on the bench, his ability in this position is thus recorded: "He was called upon to engage in the decision of some of the most delicate and important political as well as legal questions ever presented to any court in this State, and in all of which he sought to hold the scales of justice with an even hand and administer it impartially to all alike, whether of high or low degree." He had built a neat residence on the site of his childhood's home—the log-house built by his father when he first settled in the place—and having reached in some measure the aim of his life—a permanent home and

a position of usefulness and influence among his fellows—he devoted himself to the advancement of his native State in every good direction, especially in the line of pure, honest political principles.

In the first campaign for the election of a representative in Congress, after the reorganization of the National Government was accomplished in 1870, Judge Hart was nominated for the place on the Republican ticket, and after an exciting canvass was declared elected by his party; but the vote was so close, his election was disputed by the other side, and both candidates went to Washington, where the returns were examined and the question decided by a small majority in favor of the Democratic candidate. His ready acceptance of this verdict and his generous forbearance towards those who had gone beyond the limit of truth and right to compass his defeat so increased the respect and admiration of his friends that they immediately began to name him for the honor of governor of the State, and at the Republican convention held in Jacksonville, Aug. 7, 1872, he was nominated, and after a well-fought battle was elected by an unquestioned majority. A cutting from a Jacksonville newspaper of the time says: "It was not simply that Judge Hart presented such elements of popularity as were likely to achieve success, that he received the nomination. It was because the members of the convention which selected him had been witnesses to his unswerving loyalty and adherence to the principles of the party, because they were convinced of his integrity of purpose and desire to see the prosperity of the State and people, and because to these qualities was superadded an eminent fitness for the position. Even the enemies of Judge Hart admit his probity and acknowledge the purity of his motives. And it is particularly gratifying to see in the splendid 'run' he made that the delegates who nominated him so faithfully reflected the wishes of the people."

It was a great triumph of Republican principles, and as such was the source of immense satisfaction to the successful candidate and his friends. In January, 1873, he was inaugurated in the Capitol at Tallahassee, before a large and enthusiastic assembly, with unusual ceremonies, Chief Justice Edwin M. Randall administering the oath of office. Gov. Hart's inaugural address, which was quite lengthy and characteristic, began with these words: "I have just

sworn to support, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States and of Florida against all enemies, domestic or foreign, and that I will bear true faith, loyalty and allegiance to the same, and faithfully perform the duties of this office, and praying for the help of God, I mean to do so."

This was the auspicious beginning of what was hoped would be four years of good government and progressive prosperity for Florida; but, alas! disappointment was already foreshadowed in the precarious health of the new Executive. The campaign previous to the election had been unusually severe, and Judge Hart had entered into it personally with all his might; traveling through the less settled counties in rude conveyances, exposed to dampness and malaria, speaking by night and day, almost always in the open air, until his naturally vigorous health gave way, and before the close of the canvass he was prostrated with a severe attack of pneumonia. This left him with a serious weakness of the lungs which no medical treatment seemed able to remove. By the advice of his physicians he spent the summer after the inauguration at the North, mainly with his wife's relatives in Morristown, N. J., consulting physicians there and in New York without receiving any decided benefit. But on his return South he was able to attend to the most important duties of his office and to write his first annual message, which was given to the Legislature Jan. 5, 1874. In this, after reviewing the past troubles of the State, he congratulates the people on the bright outlook for the future. He says: "It is very gratifying to know that the spirit of political hatred and bitterness is well nigh extinguished, and that the people of all parties are more united and harmonized than they have been for many years. Political antagonisms still exist, but that peculiar acerbity and rankling animosity that once characterized political opposition has given place to the ordinary antagonisms that are legitimate and founded upon reasonable differences of opinion. So that I have strong reasons for entertaining the hope that our beloved State has passed through the severest fires of its affliction, and that henceforth by the united will and purpose of our whole people, peace and good government will be secured. God has given us a goodly heritage. The bright skies, balmy and health-

ful atmosphere, and the genial and fruitful soil of Florida are now attracting largely the attention of the people of the North. A good government, with wise and wholesome laws and a quiet, industrious and law-abiding citizenship is all that is required to make Florida, at no distant day, a prosperous and happy Commonwealth."

In the midst of these bright anticipations of the future of his State, and the fulfillment of his long-cherished hope, in seeing her growing prosperity, the call came to him to renounce his share in the coming improvement, and to give up the reins of authority into other hands. It was not altogether unexpected; he had calmly faced the probability that his days were numbered; and with a Christian hope in a life hereafter and firm faith in Christ as his Saviour, he had no dread of the event of death for himself, but he wanted to live for his family and country. Bravely he fought with his physical weakness, and worked with all the energy he could command to get the business of his office adjusted. Just after a conference with his fellow officials on the veranda of his home in Jacksonville, March 18, 1874, the summons came. A sudden hemorrhage filled his lungs, and before medical aid could be called, his breathing ceased, and only his lifeless form, so noble and stalwart in health, remained with his stricken wife and family. It was a terrible shock to them and to the whole community of city and State. They were not looking for such a sudden termination of his career of usefulness, but were hoping from his strong vitality and the mild climate that he would be able gradually to overcome his weakness and at least fill out his term of office. And as the sad news was flashed from point to point, return telegrams of sorrow and sympathy poured into the shadowed home, and an air of surprised sadness pervaded not only the city where his remains lay in state, and at the capital, which had so recently welcomed and honored him, but all over the State there were evidences of sincere mourning for the sudden departure of the Chief Executive.

The funeral was held on Saturday, March 22. The body had been embalmed and placed in a handsome metallic casket bearing the simple inscription:

Ossian B. Hart.
Died March 18, 1874,
Aged fifty-seven years.

Beautiful floral tributes, some composed wholly of orange blossoms, rested on and around it. The services were held in the Presbyterian Church, which he had attended with his family, though he had never become a member. The funeral cortège was the largest ever known, to that date, in Jacksonville, and embraced all the prominent State and municipal officers, members of the Bar, United States officials, citizens and strangers. All the bunting of the city was displayed at half-mast, the public offices and many stores were closed, the bells of the churches and the fire-alarm bell tolled solemnly at intervals, as the procession passed through the streets, giving unmistakable evidence that the form of one honored and loved was being borne to its final rest. The colored people, who felt they had lost one of their truest, staunchest friends, shared in the general grief, and decorously followed the procession of carriages on foot.

The church was filled to its utmost capacity, while numbers crowded on the outside. The pastor took for his text the lament of David over Saul and Jonathan, 2 Samuel 1, 27, "How are the mighty fallen!" and gave a feeling and appropriate address, after which a personal friend of Mrs. Hart sang with impressive sweetness the hymn, "Come Ye Disconsolate." Hundreds then passed up the aisle to take a last view of the well-known face. The service in the church finished, the procession reformed and escorted the remains to the City Cemetery, where they were reverently laid to rest to await the resurrection morn.

Thus was ended, in his ripe manhood and at the height of his usefulness, the earthly life and labors of one of Florida's noblest sons—one intimately associated with her early history and more recent struggles, and one who really fell a victim to his self-sacrificing devotion to her welfare.

Memorial resolutions were passed and published by the members of the Bar of the Supreme Court at Tallahassee, by the members of the Bar of Key West, Tampa, Marianna and other places, all testifying in the warmest manner to their regard for him as an associate, and their ap-

preciation of his honorable character and efficient service as a public officer.

Gov. Hart inherited from his father much valuable real estate in the city he had founded, but through his too ready sympathy for those who looked to him for aid—the helpless freedmen who had belonged to the family, and others of the white people, who had become destitute through the change in social conditions—as well as his generous gifts toward political expenses, had so used up his resources that he had little to leave to his widow besides the home they had occupied together the last few years of his life; and this beautiful new residence, so endeared to her by its associations with those last days, was destroyed by fire about two years after his death, the final disaster of an unusually eventful life. They had no children of their own, but had brought up several little motherless girls, whom they counted and loved as daughters, and who mourned with the chief mourner the passing away of him who had been the joy and strength of the household.