

Major John B. Alexander. Among the first lawyers to practice at the Indiana bar was John B. Alexander. "He was born in Carlisle, Cumberland county, Pennsylvania, and emigrated to Greensburg, Pa., early in the present century. He was admitted to the Westmoreland bar on motion of William Wilkins, Esq., at the December term of court, 1804. He opened his first office there, engaged in the practice of the law, and resided there until the war of 1812 commenced. Mr. Alexander had been liberally educated, having been graduated at Dickinson college, Carlisle.

"He was a good Latin scholar, readily reading and explaining old law writers to the court. In his old age he was heard to quote Horace in the original in ordinary conversation with gentlemen of culture.

"Mr. Alexander had little regard for any literary pursuit outside of his profession. He was no politician, and read no newspapers, novels, magazines or histories. His sole literary recreation was the reading of Shakespeare. This he knew so well that he quoted it regularly in court, and could repeat whole scenes without any mistake, and with proper manner and pronunciation. And to him in his profession, the great dramatist was undoubtedly of great use, and particularly in this, that it supplemented him with a fund of quotations with which, in addressing juries, he could relieve the dryness and dullness of professional language.

"His father having a large family to support, he, after having received his collegiate education, was thrown upon his own resources. He studied much, worked hard and carefully, and as a return rose to the front rank at the bar, and gained a practice in the counties of Westmoreland and Indiana. Only on two occasions did he allow his mind to be drawn away or diverted from the practice of his profession. The first of these occasions was the war of 1812. When that war with Great Britain commenced he collected a company of volunteers, and served with great credit under Gen. Harrison in several engagements with the British and Indians. The name of his company was 'The Greensburg Rifles.' After his return he resumed the practice of the law, rose to the head of the Greensburg bar, and obtained a lucrative practice in that and the adjoining counties.

"He raised a company of artillery, which was the model company of the military division in which the militia of the State was divided, and was truly a fine one in appearance. The men were handsomely uniformed, were all over six feet in height, and their two handsome brass cannons were drawn by large gray horses. The rank and file consisted of substantial farmers and stout mechanics and laborers. In rich and gaudy uniform, Alexander always commanded in person, and he expended a large sum of money in equipments, horses and donations. He, with his company, turned out in honor of Lafayette when he passed through the southwestern part of Westmoreland county. Alexander not only encouraged the profession of arms by his example, but he went so far as to acknowledge the code of honor in theory and practice. He fought a duel with a Mr. Mason, of Uniontown, Fayette Co. They exchanged shots, but neither was wounded. Both desired a second fire, but the seconds refused on the ground that the point of honor for which they fought did not require another interchange of deadly missives.

"The second and less fortunate occasion which drew off his attention from the agreeable oil of the office and the bar was his election to the State Assembly. It was admitted by all that his representative career was a failure. He was like a fish out of water. He there came in contact with men who, although they could scarcely have spelled their way

through the horn-boo, could have bought and sold him in legislative trickery every hour in the day. For those he had the utmost contempt, and he appeared to regard the whole legislative body somewhat as Gulliver regarded a similar assembly in Lilliput. Before the session closed he left them in disgust, mounted his horse and rode home. Thenceforth he took no part in politics whatever until 1840, when his old commander was nominated for the presidency. During that campaign he consented to preside at a Harrison meeting at Greensburg. He was then on the verge of eternity, and died shortly after, in the same year.

“As a sound and well-read lawyer he had, as we said, no equal at the Westmoreland bar, and in the special branch of the law relating to land title he had no superior in western Pennsylvania. He was retained as counsel in many cases of disputed title in the court of last resort in the State, and even in some cases of a like character which were adjudicated in the highest court of the United States. He was the counsel in one particularly heavy land-title case on an appeal to the Supreme Court of the United States, wherein his adversary was the celebrated William Wirt. Alexander gained his cause, and the argument displayed such legal acumen that he astonished the bench as well as the bar. At its conclusion he was complimented by Mr. Wirt and by Daniel Webster, who was present, and who expressed in his warm hearted way his approbation of the manner in which he had handled his case, of his exposition of the law, and the profundity of his legal reasoning and learning. In the intricate and abstruse practice of the land law of Pennsylvania Alexander was, without doubt, the superior of Wirt. Wirt was a politician, an orator and literary man, but to the law alone had Alexander devoted an almost entire attention. If Wirt were the Bacon, Alexander was the Coke. He brought to his case his stored-up learning of the common law, he could recall old judicial decisions, quote black-letter authority from the law-Latin and Norman-French test-books of the Middle Ages, marshal together all the maxims of the common law bearing on the capacity and the incapacity of witnesses to testify, bring the court from the fountain sources of legal wisdom down through a long series of English decisions to a moderate date, and examine into the law of evidence as it was recognized in Pennsylvania, and apply it to his arguments in his cases.

“His ancestors were Scotch-Irish, and they had emigrated to this country before the Revolution. His father, Peter Alexander, was born in Cumberland county, Pa. The family were whigs and patriots during the war of the Revolution. The wife of John B, was a Miss Smith, of Cumberland county. He had no children. His wife survived him, and on her death the property went to the collateral heirs. Besides two sisters he had two brothers: Samuel Alexander, who was leading lawyer of the Carlisle, Cumberland county bar, and Thomas Alexander, who once lived with his brother in Greensburg, and who was never married.

“In business transactions the integrity of Alexander was inflexible. He was never known to do a dishonest action. No man could say that he ever defrauded him of a dollar. His handsome fortune was all gained by honorable professional toil.”