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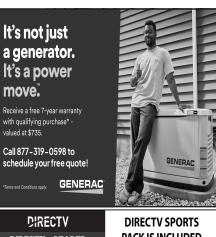


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# History Minute

Thomas Boles

By Dr. Ken Bridges - Professor of History, South Arkansas Community College South Arkansas Historical Preservation Society

Backstabbing and corruption are often common features of politics, so much so that many people are repelled by the entire process. The obsessive quest for power sometimes turns upstanding citizens into monstrous tyrants. In Arkansas, this resulted in one of the standing most controversial elections in state history: two men and the 1870 congressional race that was ultimately stolen.

Thomas Boles was born near Clarksville in July 1837. Most of his life and later career would center around western Arkansas. He served as a teacher for a time before winning election as sheriff of Yell County in 1858. He began studying law and was admitted to the state bar in 1860. When Arkansas seceded from the Union and the Civil War erupted, Boles, a Unionist, enlisted in the Union Army, eventually rising to the rank of captain. After the war ended in 1865. Boles became a judge for the Fourth Judicial District where he showed often surprising leniency for the actions of indicted Confederate soldiers against civilians during the Civil War. In 1868, Arkansas held its first congressional elections since before the Civil War. It was the midst of Reconstruction, and Arkansas had progressed to the point that it had been readmitted. Boles ran for Congress for the Third Congressional District, encompassing large portions of Western Arkansas. It was a time of great unrest in Arkansas. In June, Congressman Hinds Thomas was assassinated in Monroe County. Two months later, former Confederate General and former Congressman Thomas Hindman was murdered by unknown gunmen. The state militia was in running gunfights with the Ku Klux Klan across the state. Federal troops supervised voter registration and the conduct of the balloting, but few problems were observed. Boles won fairly easilv over Democratic nominee L. B. Nash with 63% of the vote.

As the 1870 contest approached, corruption and bloodshed continued to terrorize the state. The Arkansas Republican Party was deeply beset by strife. Bribery and embezzlement were common problems for Republican administrations across the state. The people grew tired of the unrest and the larceny. John Edwards, also a Republican, challenged Boles in the

John Edwards was born in Louisville, Kentucky, is October 1815. His father was a slaveowner, but the younger Edwards was disgusted with slavery. As a young man, he left Kentucky for neighboring Indiana and became an attorney. He was elected to the Indiana state legislature in 1848 and left after one term as part of the California Gold Rush. He served briefly as a local judge before returning to Indiana in 1852 and winning election to the state senate. Shortly afterward, Edwards left for Iowa where he set up a new law firm. He was part of the 1856 Iowa State Constitutional Convention and was elected to two terms in the Iowa House of Representatives, eventually becoming Speaker of the House. He enlisted in the Union Army in

1861, rising to command the 18th Iowa Infantry

in several of the battles in Northwest Arkansas. He was eventually promoted to brigadier general and sent to command the garrison at Fort Smith. In 1866, he was appointed assessor of internal revenue for the federal government.

In 1870, Edwards belonged to the faction known as the Liberal Republicans, a faction calling for reform and an end to corruption. However, many Republicans refused to back any internal investigations or any attempts to strengthen anti-corruption laws and doubleddown on their duplicity and theft. Democrats endorsed Edwards instead of forwarding their own candidate. When the dust settled, Edwards was declared the official winner with 6.874 votes, or 54% of the vote, a lead of 900 votes over Boles. Boles, however, charged the election had been stolen. Bribery and stolen votes became a standard feature of elections during Reconstruction, with many contests becoming not a matter of who had the confidence of the people but who had the most money to bribe with and who had the most guns at the ready. Some elections were so riddled with fraud that the ultimate winner was never clear. Ballots were illegally created or destroyed in the counting rooms, often drastically changing vote total. Republican Gov. Powell Clayton had developed a strong dislike for Boles and determined Edwards was the winner. Though Edwards was sworn in, Boles continued his challenge. He took his case straight to the House Elections Committee, which studied the case at length for months. Republicans had a tight control on the House of Representatives, controlling it by a margin of 141 seats to 97 for the Democrats. After nearly a year of accusations and investigations, Congress decided that the election had been stolen, and Boles was sworn into the seat in February 1872. No charges were ever brought against anyone in the

In the end, in spite of all the fighting and all the accusations and bitterness, neither Edwards nor Boles sought election for fall 1872. Instead, the third district seat was won by Democrat Thomas Gunter with nearly 60% of the vote over Republican William Wilshire. Democrats swept three of the four congressional seats for the state in that election, all except for a statewide seat all Arkansans could vote on that became available after the 1870 Census.

Boles made one more attempt to step back into politics. In 1881, he began an eight year tenure as a United States Marshal. In 1884, he won the Republican nomination for governor but was crushed in the general election by Democratic candidate Simon P. Hughes. In 1897, Boles earned an appointment as clerk for the federal circuit court where he served quietly until his death in 1905 in Fort Smith. As for Edwards, he never returned to Arkansas. He set up a law firm in Washington, DC, and practiced until his death in 1894. The people turned their backs on the corruption. locking Republicans of Arkansas politics for most of the next century.