

Judge John Griffin

Of all the judges who served in Michigan territory during the period when they together with the governor constituted the legislative body, Judge Griffin has left the least impress upon its institutions or upon the memory of the people. Although appointed judge by President Jefferson, December 23, 1805, and serving until February 1, 1824, he left only the impression of an indolent, indifferent, uninteresting official, whose interests were never in the territory, and who gave to his duties as little time and attention as he could escape with.

He came from a distinguished Virginia family but was born in Scotland, April 20, 1771. His father was Cyrus Griffin of Virginia, who as a young man went abroad for his education, and was entered at the Middle Temple as a student and meeting Christina, the daughter of the Earl of Traquhair, fell in love with her, found his affection reciprocated and against her father's objection they were married.

The father forgave and the young couple lived for a time at the father's castle at Traquhair, Peebles county, Scotland, and there John was born.

Not long after, Cyrus with his wife and son returned to Virginia and took an active part in arousing hostility to England, and in 1778 was sent to the Continental congress as one of the Virginia delegates, serving at that time three years and later in 1787-8 and in the last year of the congress was its president. He held numerous offices of importance, including that of United States district judge in Virginia, and it was no doubt due to his influence that his son was appointed on December 8, 1800, one of the judges of Indiana territory. He was then twenty-nine years of age, was of good appearance and manners. He had spent some time abroad and had studied law.

During the period from March 3, 1802, to the creation of Michigan territory all of the present state of Michigan was attached to Indiana so that Judge Griffin for three years exercised a nominal jurisdiction over Detroit and the adjacent

country, although in fact no Indiana judge ever held court in Michigan and Michigan people had no knowledge of or paid attention to any laws which the Indiana legislature enacted.

It was at Judge Griffin's own request that he was transferred as United States judge from Indiana to Michigan and a few years later he tried in vain to exchange his position in Michigan with Judge Stanley Griswold, then United States judge in Illinois territory.

Although appointed in December, 1805, it was not until September, 1806, that he first reached Detroit and took up his duties there.

One of the first acts of the legislative board composed of the governor and judges was to incorporate the Detroit bank and in this institution Judge Griffin subscribed for ten shares. Stocks were always a favorite form of investment of the judge and frequent references are made in the letters of his contemporaries to his stock interests.

In the differences which soon arose between Governor Hull and Judge Woodward, the sympathies and acts of Judge Griffin were generally on the side of Woodward, and when Judge Witherell came on in the place of Judge Bates, in nearly all cases a division found Woodward and Griffin on one side—Hull and Witherell on the other.

Conflict, however, was distasteful to him; he liked peace and quiet, but he was not afraid on occasion to act independently and even in opposition to all the other members of the board. He has left no written opinions in cases decided by the court of which he was a member, so the quality and extent of his legal learning cannot now be determined.

During his entire term of office in Michigan Judge Griffin spent much of his time away from the territory. He first arrived at Detroit in September, 1806, and the following spring he left for a trip to St. Louis, spending some time in Vincennes where he responded to a toast at a Fourth of July celebration and did not return to Detroit until the summer of 1808.

In August, 1811, he left for an extended visit to his old home in Virginia to look after the affairs of his father who

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had died in December of the previous year at Yorktown, and returned to Detroit in the spring of 1812. After the surrender of Detroit he went east and came back to his official duties in the fall of 1814.

With his associates he was legislated out of office by congress, which ended his official career, February 1, 1824, but he did not remain in Detroit until that time, leaving for Philadelphia, where he remained for the rest of his life, living quietly upon his small income from investments in stocks.

He had bought in 1816 a farm near Monroe, being Private Claim 495, which had been for some time in the Knaggs family and of which he retained the ownership until his death, and which was sold by his heirs in 1853.

He died in Philadelphia in July, 1849, leaving an estate of little more than \$4,000.00, consisting of bank stock and bonds; this was in addition to his Michigan land.

In his position as judge he sometimes displayed independent judgment and firmness but in general he was disposed to accept and follow the guidance of the stronger mind of Judge Woodward. Perhaps a fair characterization of him is that of William Woodbridge, who said that he was a man of respectable literary acquirements, of good taste and good manners, but with a mind lamentably inert.