

**EMINENT PERSONS:
BIOGRAPHIES,
REPRINTED FROM THE
TIMES, VOL. VI, 1893-1894**

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REPRINTED FROM *THE TIMES*

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JAMES BLAINE

1830-1893

OBITUARY NOTICE, FRIDAY, JANUARY 27, 1893

JAMES GILLESPIE BLAINE was born on 31st January 1830, at Indian-hill Farm, in Washington County, Pennsylvania. His father, Ephraim Lyon Blaine, was of Scotch descent. He came of a stock that had settled in the Cumberland Valley about 1725; the ancestors of his mother, who was a Catholic, came from county Donegal; his great grandfather, Colonel Ephraim Blaine, made a figure in the War of Independence. He served with distinction from 1778 to 1783 as Commissary-General under Washington. The father of the future statesman was a country lawyer, who inherited an estate in Western Pennsylvania more remarkable for size than rental. Blaine has suffered much from indiscreet, unmeasured praise of party biographers, anxious to prove, in the crisis of a Presidential campaign, that he was a heaven-born leader of men. But they have not been able to discover respecting his achievements at school, in Lancaster, Ohio, or in Washington College, evidence of remarkable precocity. He was a lad of quick parts and good memory, who excelled in spelling matches—his biographers proudly and minutely record certain victories of this kind. He owed much to the instruction of an Englishman, Mr. Lyons, while he lived in the house of the Hon. Mr. Thomas Ewing, then Secretary of the Treasury, at Lancaster, Ohio. He began the study of law, but he never practised. For about two years he was "professor"

—*Anglicæ*, usher—in the Western or Blue Lick Military Institute at Georgetown, Kentucky, and there, in Henry Clay's State, with the memories of the great orator still fresh, he acquired his taste for political life. We next get a glimpse of him in Philadelphia as a teacher and contributor to the *Daily Inquirer* of that city. As a youth of 21 he became part owner and editor of the *Kennebec Journal*, published in Augusta, in the State of Maine, and then a somewhat obscure Republican newspaper "badly run down." He seems to have electrified the quiet people of Maine by his fluent, emphatic rhetoric. One of his admirers in after years, speaking of that journal in Blaine's time, said that "the loud thunder of artillery is heard along its columns; the charge of cavalry and the sweep of infantry are upon its pages"—in more sober English, he was an adept at what with country folk in outlying parts passed for extremely fine writing. He quickly made his mark in Maine politics. The Governor of the State sent him on a mission to examine the prisons and penitentiaries of the other States, with a view to the improvement of those of Maine; and he was a delegate to the Republican Convention at Philadelphia which nominated Frémont. There is a story of his being called upon on his return to give an account of the proceedings at the Convention. Not being at that time a practised speaker, he paused, stumbled, and seemed about to break down, when, recovering himself, he launched into an eloquent speech. From that time his reputation as an orator was established. Even greater, and of no less rapid growth, was his reputation as a party organiser. As chairman of the Executive Council of the Republican party in Maine, even at the age of 29 he displayed those powers of organising and manipulating in which he was almost unrivalled. In 1858 he was elected a member of the Maine Legislature, and soon became Speaker of the House, a position for which he was well fitted by his quick apprehension and excellent judgment. In 1862 he was returned to Congress by a majority of 3422, and for six terms he was returned by large majorities. The Civil War was still raging, but fortune was beginning to declare unmistakably for the North. "I entered this Congress in the midst of the hot flames of the war, when the Union was rocking to its foundation, and no man knew whether he was to have a country or not." Such was his own description of the position of affairs; we define it more precisely by saying that the

darkest days of the Union were over, and that the victory of Gettysburg and the capture of Vicksburg were at hand, and that confidence in the power of the North to crush the South was reviving. It did not fall to Blaine to struggle for the Union in its deepest gloom. He had no important part or lot in the work which Lincoln, Seward, and Chase performed; we do not find his name conspicuously written in any history of the war, but he was among the foremost in directing the policy and details of Reconstruction. Blaine was a born member of Congress. His vigour, acumen, readiness, and unfailing energy marked him out as a party leader. He was elected Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1869—an office which he held till 1874—a period of almost unequalled length. On all hands it was admitted that in that position of difficulty he displayed rare talents. Since Henry Clay there had been no more successful Speaker. His history for ten years is really the history of Congress. He served on all the principal committees. He spoke often, and always with effect. "Men call him," said an admirer, "magnetic simply because they do not understand him. He has not the inexhaustible flow of rhetoric, or of wit, or of drollery, which characterises one and another of our orators, but he has a never-failing fund of brilliant common-sense and of quick human sympathy. . . . His logic is so luminous that it often has the effect of wit."

Never was his ability questioned; unfortunately his integrity was assailed on an occasion which cannot be passed over in any truthful life of Mr. Blaine. In 1876 an investigation by a Committee of the House of Representatives brought to light certain letters—the famous "Mulligan Letters," written by him in 1869, when he was Speaker of the House. They were addressed to a Mr. Fisher and a Mr. Caldwell, who were interested in the construction of the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad, Arkansas, a railroad which received from Congress a valuable grant of land. We need not set out the text of these much-controverted letters, or revive in all its fulness a controversy now forgotten. It is enough to say that they contained such expressions—qualified, it is true, by others—as these:—"Your offer to admit to a participation in the new railroad enterprise is in every respect as I could expect or desire." "I don't feel that I shall prove a deadhead in the enterprise." "I see various channels in which I know I can be useful."