

Benjamin Harvey Hill Biography

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Biography

The American Benjamin Harvey Hill (1823-1882) was a prominent Georgia politician during the Civil War and Reconstruction eras.

Benjamin H. Hill was born on Sept. 14, 1823, into a Georgia frontier family. He graduated with first honors from the University of Georgia in 1843. Admitted to the bar, he established a highly profitable practice in LaGrange, Ga., which he maintained throughout his public career.

Hill began his political life as a Whig, devoted to the union of the states and the Constitution. In 1851, as a member of the lower house of the Georgia Assembly, he encouraged acceptance of the Compromise of 1850 to quiet the slavery issue. After a 4-year retirement from public life, Hill was defeated in a bid for the U.S. Congress. He then cast his lot with the American, or "Know-Nothing," party. In 1857 Hill ran unsuccessfully for the governorship of Georgia. In the presidential race of 1860, he attempted vainly to effect a fusion in Georgia of the three tickets opposing Abraham Lincoln.

In January 1861, in the state convention, Hill opposed the motion to secede from the Union but finally signed the Ordinance of Secession. As a member of the Provisional Congress, he actively participated in organizing the Confederate government. In November 1861 Hill was elected to the Confederate Senate, where he remained throughout the war. Recognized as a spokesman for President Jefferson Davis, he was called upon to defend such controversial policies as conscription and suspension of the writ of habeas corpus; he justified them as war measures. After the war he was arrested and imprisoned for 3 months.

From 1867 until 1870 Hill conducted a strenuous campaign against the reconstruction program. But by late 1870 he advised Georgians to accept the Reconstruction Acts as accomplished facts and to involve themselves in new issues. His address before the Georgia Alumni Society in 1871 stated the case for a "New South." At about the same time, Hill provoked the anger of conservatives by participating in the sale of the state railroad with a group of Republicans.

In 1875, despite violent opposition, Hill was elected to the U.S. Congress. In Washington he was characterized as a Southern champion, defending Jefferson Davis and the Confederate government against charges of inhumanity. He was elected to the U.S. Senate in January 1877 but did not live out his term. He died of cancer in Atlanta on Aug. 16, 1882.