

# James Zachariah George Biography

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# Biography

The American politician and jurist James Zachariah George (1826-1897) was one of Mississippi's strongest white-supremacy statesmen in the Reconstruction era.

James George was born on Oct. 20, 1826, in Monroe County, Ga. After his father's death his mother moved to Mississippi, where George spent the bulk of his life. His early education was limited, but by diligence and long study he acquired an above-average classical knowledge.

After service in the Mexican War (1846-1848) in Jefferson Davis's 1st Mississippi Volunteers, George gained admittance to the Mississippi bar. He was a member of the state convention that passed the 1861 ordinance of secession. Commissioned a captain of the Confederate infantry at the Civil War's outset, he ultimately rose to the rank of colonel of cavalry. Yet his military career was limited by 2 years spent as a war prisoner.

George resumed his law practice in 1865. His *Digest of Supreme Court Decisions* (1872), a compilation of court summaries dating back to Mississippi's statehood, still remains a basic reference guide. Meanwhile his law partnership became Mississippi's leading legal firm. In politics he soon gained the important post of chairman of the State Democratic Committee. His championship of the restoration of white supremacy in Mississippi prevented his election to Congress during the period of military reconstruction. In 1879, however, he was appointed to the Mississippi Supreme Court and was immediately elected chief justice. In 1881 he was elected to the U.S. Senate and held this office until his death.

Throughout his senatorial career, George consistently fought Federal interference in Mississippi affairs. He was ever the champion of the common people; despite his wealth and social prestige, he took pride in being called "the Commoner" by the admiring small-farmer element of Mississippi.

George was prominent in framing and passing the 1890 Mississippi Constitution. He was the only Senate Democrat who supported the Sherman Antitrust Act (1890). In his last years he began writing *The Political History of Slavery in the United States*. The unfinished text was published 18 years after his death on Aug. 14, 1897.

A contemporary wrote that George's "robust physique, virile mind, tireless industry, firm will and capacity for sustained effort" made him "a type of the self-made men who have created and been created by this great republic."