

CHARLES GRIER SELLERS JR.

James K. Polk, Volume 1

Jacksonian 1795-1843



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JAMES K. POLK, *JACKSONIAN*

1795-1843

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BY CHARLES GRIER SELLERS, JR.

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

1957

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L.C. CARD 57-5457

Publication of this book has been aided by a grant
from the Princeton University Research Fund



Printed in the United States of America
by Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey

For My
Mother and Father

PREFACE

THIS VOLUME frankly purports to be both biography and history. It rests, indeed, on the proposition that the two cannot be separated: that personality cannot be divorced from history, and that history cannot be divorced from personality. The current revival of the old-fashioned "life and times" type of historical biography means, I hope, that this proposition is coming to be more generally accepted.

The project appealed to me originally for its biographical value alone. Over thirty years ago Eugene I. McCormac's *James K. Polk: A Political Biography* so impressively demonstrated Polk's presidential services that he has come to be recognized as one of our strongest chief executives. Yet Professor McCormac left much to be revealed about Polk, the man, and his growth through the first forty-eight of his fifty-four years. Such a figure, I felt and still feel, deserves to be as fully known as the record permits.

I was not long in discovering the obstacles that perhaps led my predecessor to eschew the task of bringing to life the personality concealed behind Polk's disciplined public façade. While I have had no choice but to present Polk in the main as his contemporaries saw him, I have sought to convey also some sense of the dramatic inner developments that alone explain the kind of man he was. At the same time I have tried to relate Polk's personal growth at every stage to the historical circumstances that environed him.

As the story took shape, however, I came to value it as much for its illumination of the experience of his generation of Americans as for its revelation of Polk. In the life of his immediate family, such historical abstractions as the westward movement, the American Revolution, Jeffersonian Republicanism, land speculation, and frontier leadership are translated into concrete human terms. Polk himself, to a unique degree and quite aside from his intrinsic importance, was in the thick of the major political developments of his period: the rise of popular democracy, the Jacksonian struggles of the 1830's, and after 1835 the emergence of sectional animosities that eventually overrode the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian issues. Finally, in the climactic years beyond the present volume, the American people's passage from the Jacksonian epoch of their history into a new and fateful one was most vividly exemplified in Polk's presi-

P R E F A C E

dential experiences as the last national leader who had a chance to apply the old Jeffersonian-Jacksonian convictions to solution of the sectional problem.

The labors of an army of able investigators have by now turned up most of the important information we shall ever have about these developments as general phenomena on a national scale. Yet historical events are inevitably distorted and oversimplified when approached exclusively at this generalized level, and in the absence of adequate state studies the particulars are too often inferred from the generalizations. The time has come for trained scholars to turn more of their attention from the national and general to the local and particular, from "the rise of popular democracy," for instance, to the particular circumstances that led particular people at particular times and places to demand a greater voice in the decisions of their magistrates, legislators, or congressmen. Only through careful investigation at the levels where ordinary human motivations are observable can we grasp the complex of convictions, aspirations, and interests that sustained, say, Jacksonian Democracy or the American System.

Polk's biography offers an unusual opportunity to bridge this gap between the nationally significant and the narrowly local, since Tennessee political history is documented with singular fullness in the voluminous Polk and Jackson papers. I have attached great importance to exploiting this opportunity, and I hope that readers will find the textbook clichés about the Jacksonian period sharpened by being tied to the actions of real people in concrete situations. The relationship between Polk, the doctrinaire Republican, and his brother-in-law James Walker, the entrepreneurial democrat, to take one example, personifies strikingly the ambivalent orientation of this whole generation of Americans: plunging headlong into the exploitation and transformation of a bountiful environment, yet drawn almost as powerfully back toward the simplicity and virtue of a half-imagined agrarian past, symbolized for Polk by Old Mecklenburg.

Since I have found the Old Mecklenburg theme to be a major motif in the Polk story, I should confess that I am, like Polk, a native of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. And though by my day Polk's Old Mecklenburg had become a bustling, urbanized, newly rich showpiece of the New South, my family's roots in the surrounding countryside connect me more closely, perhaps, with the sur-

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viving vestiges of an older way of life. I have doubtless treated the Old Mecklenburg theme more sympathetically than others would, but I do not believe I have made it any more important in the life of Polk and his generation than it actually was.

I want to thank a host of librarians and archivists for the innumerable services and kindnesses that made pleasant and fruitful my visits to the institutions indicated in the notes to this volume. An equally indispensable obligation of another kind is owed to the Princeton University Research Fund for making possible the completion and publication of this study. My greatest debt of gratitude is to my friend Arthur Link, who sacrificed the progress of his own work to a painstaking reading of my manuscript, every page of which now bears the mark of his expert hand. Professors Clement Eaton and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and my colleague Professor Robert R. Palmer were also generous with their time and wisdom in reading the manuscript and suggesting improvements. Finally, I am deeply grateful to Professor Fletcher M. Green of the University of North Carolina, who guided the early evolution of this project as a doctoral dissertation and who, by precept, example, and friendship, continues to make historical scholarship exciting for his many present and former students.

CHARLES GRIER SELLERS, JR.

Princeton, New Jersey

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JANE KNOX POLK. Painting in the Sam Polk House, Polk Memorial Association, Columbia, Tenn.

COLONEL WILLIAM POLK. Engraving from a painting, in *Year Book of the Society of Sons of the Revolution in the State of New York* (New York, 1893), 244.

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA. Detail from a lithograph made about 1861, owned by the University of North Carolina. The third floor of Old East on the left had been added since Polk's student days, as had Smith Hall, a corner of which is visible between Old East and New College.

PLATE II

FELIX GRUNDY. Engraving from a painting by Washington B. Cooper, in [James B. Longacre and James Herring,] *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans: with Biographical Sketches* (4 vols., Philadelphia, 1856), III, plate 35.

SAM POLK HOUSE. Columbia, Tenn., Wiles-Hood Photographers, Nashville.

POLK'S LAW OFFICE. From an old newspaper photograph, Sam Polk House, Polk Memorial Association, Columbia, Tenn.

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ANDREW JACKSON. Painting by Asher B. Durand, courtesy of The New-York Historical Society, New York City.

HUGH LAWSON WHITE. Painting in the Tennessee Historical Society, Nashville.

WILLIAM CARROLL. Painting by Washington B. Cooper, in the Tennessee Historical Society, Nashville.

CAVE JOHNSON. Engraving from a daguerreotype, in *The United States Magazine, and Democratic Review*, XVII (Oct. 1845), 242.

PLATE IV

JAMES KNOX POLK and SARAH CHILDRESS POLK. A pair of paintings in the Sam Polk House, Polk Memorial Association, Columbia, Tenn. These are probably the paintings made at Washington in the 1830's by Andrew Jackson's friend and "court painter," Ralph E. W. Earl. The circumstances are described as follows in Mrs. Polk's reminiscences: "The artist Earle had spent some time with General Jackson at the White House. During his stay there

ILLUSTRATIONS

the Tennesseans who were assembled one evening in the parlor of Mr. and Mrs. Polk proposed that they should have their portraits painted by him, and this proposition was soon carried into effect. Mrs. Polk's portrait, the earliest one of her, has preserved her youthful appearance, with the bright eyes, and raven hair hanging in clustering curls around her face." Anson and Fanny Nelson, *Memorials of Sarah Childress Polk: Wife of the Eleventh President of the United States* (New York, 1892), 38.

PLATE V

THE OLD HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. Painting by Samuel F. B. Morse, in the Collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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RICHARD M. JOHNSON. Lithograph by Charles Fenderich, 1840, Library of Congress.

THE CITY OF WASHINGTON, 1833. Detail from an engraving of a painting by George Cooke, Library of Congress.

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EPHRAIM H. FOSTER. Painting in the Tennessee Historical Society, Nashville.

JAMES C. JONES. Painting by Washington B. Cooper, Tennessee Historical Society, Nashville.

THE COURTHOUSE AT NASHVILLE, MEETING PLACE OF THE TENNESSEE LEGISLATURE. An 1832 print, Tennessee State Library, Nashville.

PLATE VIII

POLK AS GOVERNOR. Lithograph by Charles Fenderich, about 1840, Library of Congress.

MAPS OF TENNESSEE

(Pages 34-35)

JAMES K. POLK, *JACKSONIAN*
1795-1843

S Y M B O L S

DU	Duke University Library, Durham, N.C.
HEH	Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, Calif.
HSP	Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
JUL	Joint University Library, Nashville, Tenn.
LC	Library of Congress, Washington.
LM	McClung Collection, Lawson-McGhee Library, Knoxville, Tenn.
MHS	Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.
NA	National Archives, Washington.
NCC	North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.
NCDAH	North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh.
NCSS	Office of the North Carolina Secretary of State, Raleigh.
NYHS	New-York Historical Society, New York City.
NYPL	New York Public Library, New York City.
PU	Princeton University Library, Princeton, N.J.
SHC	Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill.
THS	Tennessee Historical Society, Nashville.

OLD MECKLENBURG

ONE AUTUMN DAY in 1821 a seventy-three-year-old patriarch, with several stalwart sons and a band of slaves at his back, came marching along a trail through the wild Chickasaw country of West Tennessee. Years of toil and exposure had left their mark on this old man, but had not quenched the determination that drove him on to one last pioneering venture. Colonel Ezekiel Polk embodied all those qualities—restlessness, avarice, adventurousness, perhaps even idealism—that were impelling Americans in their rapacious conquest of a virgin continent. Ezekiel's latest destination lay on the banks of the Hatchie River, and here he cleared fields, built rude cabins, and settled his family.

Yet Ezekiel and his kind looked east as much as west, backward as often as forward. Only their faith in the verities of the snug worlds they had left behind made possible their headlong pursuit of the limitless possibilities lying always a little to the west and a little in the future; and ever again on successive frontiers they sought to recreate their points of origin. No sooner had a semblance of civilization come to Ezekiel's settlement on the Hatchie than he began planning a great eight-room house to stand symbolically as the destination of his lifelong westward striving. Ezekiel was dead before the façade rose in the forest, but he had lived long enough to name his mansion. "Mecklen" he called it, turning back in thought at the end of life to upcountry North Carolina and the county of Mecklenburg where he had begun his pilgrimage so many years before. For Ezekiel Polk, Mecklenburg had been both an end and a beginning; in a sense he had never left it.

So it was with many another pioneer. In Tennessee one was forever encountering the sons—sons in a more than physical sense—of what they always called "Old Mecklenburg," or if not Mecklenburg, then some other half-remembered, half-imagined Arcadia. Tennessee's most famous citizen, Andrew Jackson, never forgot that he had grown up on Mecklenburg's borders; and nearby another Tennessean destined for a large public role, Ezekiel's grand-

son James K. Polk, had spent his early years. The younger Polk was not a man to expound on his spiritual origins, yet his whole career would attest to the power of nostalgia in the life of his westering, enterprising generation.

If James K. Polk never put this mood in words himself, he found satisfaction in the company of those who did, especially his friend Doctor J. G. M. Ramsey, the historian of Tennessee's pioneer period. Ramsey had not been near North Carolina until he was half grown, but his mother had imprinted the image of Old Mecklenburg indelibly on his consciousness; and he devoted the best energies of a lifetime to historical writing that conveyed his vision of this older America. When Ramsey came to erect his own mansion among the hills of East Tennessee, where the Holston and French Broad join to form the Tennessee River, he christened it, by an internal necessity, "Mecklenburg." Here Polk came whenever he found himself in this part of the state.

What Old Mecklenburg meant to Polk and Ramsey, as they sat looking out over the westbound river and reminiscing of the bygone days back east, they could not have said with any precision. Only years later, after Polk had long departed the world and a catastrophic civil war had swept away the last reminders of the old way of life, did Ramsey attempt what had not before seemed necessary. Retreating in broken spirits to a farm in Mecklenburg County itself in 1866, and finding even here that change had done its work, Ramsey labored with a passion born of despair to make explicit the *mystique* of the Old Mecklenburg. "The primitive simplicity of the pastoral stage of society," as he finally put it in the pages of General D. H. Hill's unreconstructed magazine, *The Land We Love*, "with its calm, quiet and security, its freedom from care, from avarice and the rivalries of older communities, stamped the infant settlements with the impress of another Arcadia, pure, contented, free, enlightened, enterprising, virtuous and independent."¹ More than description, more than history, this was an invocation of the moral order that had given meaning to the lives of Ramsey, the Polks, and most of their contemporaries.

II

The idyllic land of simple virtues and steady habits evoked by

¹ Mnemonika [Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey], "Sketch of Mecklenburg County," *The Land We Love*, II (Dec. 1866), 180.

Doctor Ramsey's nostalgic description corresponded closely to the real Mecklenburg that James K. Polk knew for eleven childhood years. By the time of Polk's birth in 1795, Mecklenburg's frontier rawness had mellowed, and the turbulence of its Revolutionary days had receded almost a generation into the past. From his father's door little Jimmy Polk looked out on a vista of fertile and well-cultivated fields, spreading down a gentle slope into a wide bend of Little Sugar Creek; and any suggestion of isolation was dispelled by the friendly wisps of smoke rising from neighboring cabins at several points over the horizon. Even the exciting outside world of the far-away upcountry trading centers, Salisbury fifty miles to the north and Camden sixty miles to the south, did not seem quite so remote when the Great Post Road connecting them skirted the slope in front of Jimmy's house and crossed the creek on his father's bridge. True, the Great Post Road was but a narrow, rutted track, maintained by farmers along the way; yet watching every seven days the boy could see the carrier of the United States mail pass, northbound one week and southbound the next. Only rarely had Jimmy himself been farther up the road than the two miles to Grandfather Ezekiel Polk's plantation or perhaps the nine miles more to Charlotte, the little county seat that had recently impressed George Washington as "a trifling place."² Occasionally Jimmy and his playmates might still be frightened to see an Indian on the road, but the once powerful Catawbas had been reduced to a pitiful remnant huddled some ten miles away on the banks of the river to which they had given their name.

Jimmy's father, Sam Polk, provided well for his family. They lived in a log cabin, a fitting home for a boy who would one day aspire to the presidency, but it was of the "saddlebag" type that denoted well-being in early Mecklenburg. Actually there were two houses of hewn logs, with a common roof affording a covered passageway between them, and with mud-chinked chimneys of split sticks on either end. Sam Polk's "bottom lands" along Little Sugar Creek were among the most productive in the county, and no less an authority than President Washington had noted their "very rich

² John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington, 1749-1799* (4 vols., Boston, 1925), iv, 185; Mecklenburg County, N.C., Minute Book, Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, 1796-1808, ms vol. (NCDAH; all other Mecklenburg County records hereafter cited are in the courthouse at Charlotte), entries for 26 Oct. 1796, 26 Apr. 1797; [Major Joseph Graham,] "A plan of Mclenburg and portions of joining Counties . . . January 16th 1789," ms map (NCDAH); *Halifax North Carolina Journal*, 15 Jan., 14 May 1798.

look" as he passed up the road on his way to spend the night with Uncle Thomas Polk at Charlotte four years before Jimmy was born.³ Tobacco, wheat, corn, hemp, peas, barley, oats, and flax were the principal crops of the Carolina upcountry. The tobacco was hauled down to Camden for sale to Charleston merchants as the chief source of cash at first; but falling tobacco prices and the introduction of Eli Whitney's gin resulted in its virtual replacement by cotton around the turn of the century. As Sam prospered, he bought more land, until eventually he had a plantation of more than 400 acres. Like other well-to-do farmers, Sam doubtless worked in the fields alongside his handful of Negro slaves.⁴

For Jimmy Polk the years passed placidly enough, filled with the customary chores and amusements of country boys past and present. At home he had only his little sisters, Jane and Eliza, for playmates, with perhaps a Negro boy or two. Brothers Franklin and Marshall were still babies, but there were boys in the large families on neighboring farms to provide companionship for swims in the creek or rambles through the woods. Frequent gatherings of the Polk clan at Grandfather Ezekiel's afforded other outlets for youthful gregariousness, with the numerous grandchildren romping in high excitement from yard to barn to creek and back again, while their mothers gossiped in the shade of the porch and their fathers discussed crops and politics on the front steps.

It was about the time of Jimmy's fifth birthday that the political discussions grew most heated, for Mecklenburg was passionately involved in what historians have called the "revolution of 1800." He and other Mecklenburg boys may well have been impressed by the mixture of reverence and faith with which their fathers spoke of Tom Jefferson. For Mecklenburgers identified the Republican candidate with the defense of their way of life, of the individualistic America of plowing and planting, against the seldom-experienced but vividly feared machinations of Alexander Hamilton and his aristocratic merchant and banker friends.

The election doubtless made more of an impression on Jimmy Polk

³ *Washington Diaries*, iv, 184-185; Cyrus Lee Hunter, *Sketches of Western North Carolina, Historical and Biographical* . . . (Raleigh, 1877), 92; Benson J. Lossing to [David L. Swain], 31 Dec. 1851, David L. Swain Papers (NCDAH).

⁴ *Washington Diaries*, iv, 195; François André Michaux, *Travels to the West of the Alleghany Mountains*, in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846* (32 vols., Cleveland, 1904-1907), iii, 292-298; agreement between Gen. Thomas Polk and Elkanah Watson, 23 Oct. 1786, Polk-Yeatman Papers (SHC); Mecklenburg County, N.C., Record of Deeds, Second Series, Bk. 19, p. 487.

than on other Mecklenburg boys, for while Mecklenburg as a whole was overwhelmingly Republican, the Polk clan was deeply divided. Though Jimmy's father and grandfather were ardent Republicans, Cousin William Polk, the richest man in the county, was Mecklenburg's most conspicuous Federalist. Grandfather had never got along with Cousin William, but it was still upsetting to know that the leading member of one's own family was a traitor to Mecklenburg and all it valued. This bitter family quarrel was well calculated to implant the Republican dogmas deep in the mind of a small boy, despite his total inability to comprehend the nature of the issues.

Yet Jimmy's elders were no better able than he to detect their real enemy. In its Republican rejoicing over Jefferson's victory, Mecklenburg was oblivious to the advent of the nineteenth century and the forces unleashed by James Watt and Eli Whitney. None could have believed that Mr. Jefferson himself, and his chosen successors, would be forced to beat a strategic retreat before an economic dynamism that was soon to engulf the old values. Nor could any have guessed that Sam Polk's son would one day play an important part in a last futile attempt to reconcile these old American values of his boyhood Mecklenburg with the railroad-building, cotton-shipping, stock-jobbing, industrial actualities of the America that lay a few short decades ahead.

It is not after all so important what little Jimmy Polk experienced or understood directly; for the ethos that governed his mature years was made up out of the common experiences of his clan and the wider community of Old Mecklenburg, effortlessly absorbed around Sam Polk's fireplace on long winter evenings, or in the shade of the big cedars at Grandfather Ezekiel's, or on the benches beside the little log courthouse at Charlotte. On such occasions heroic fact and prosaic history blended into legend and myth, as old men and women recalled the clearing of the forests, the terror of the Indians, the bold stand for liberty, the years of skirmishing with British soldiers. From these epic narratives Jimmy Polk absorbed his image of Old Mecklenburg, a Mecklenburg old only in experience and recent enough in time to be a living reality.

III

The Polks had been in the thick of Mecklenburg affairs since the beginning. Scotch-Irish in derivation, the first American Polks had appeared late in the seventeenth century as substantial farmers

along the broad creeks and estuaries of Maryland's Eastern Shore, where they helped organize the earliest Presbyterian congregations in the New World. It was some time before 1740 that one of these Maryland Polks, William by name, struck out for the Pennsylvania frontier and located himself in the Cumberland valley near the present site of Carlisle. Here his wife Margaret bore him eight children.⁵

By the early 1750's the good lands in the Cumberland valley were all occupied, and with William's older sons approaching the age when they would want farms of their own, the Polks began to think of joining the hundreds of Cumberland families who were already trekking down the Great Wagon Road through the Valley of Virginia into the empty southern upcountry. The third son, Thomas, "a young man of great athletickness, of much energy of both mind and body," led the way. Joining the southward procession in 1753, he pressed on until he left settlements behind as he crossed the Yadkin River in upcountry North Carolina. Finally, near the southern border of the province, he came upon a fertile country, watered by a network of creeks flowing south and west into the Catawba River. Here he cleared land, built one of the first cabins on Sugar Creek, and married a daughter of the first white settler west of the Yadkin.⁶

⁵ This account is based on the autobiographical sketch written in the 1820's by Colonel William Polk of North Carolina and reproduced in William Henry Hoyt, ed., *The Papers of Archibald D. Murphey* (2 vols., Raleigh, 1914), II, 400-410. Colonel Polk, who undoubtedly got his information from his father, Thomas Polk, says that the family migrated from Ireland to the Eastern Shore of Maryland about 1722 and to the neighborhood of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in 1740. According to [William Harrison Polk,] *Polk Family and Kinsmen* (Louisville, 1912), 3-93, the first Polks, or Pollocks as they were originally known, arrived on the Eastern Shore in the latter decades of the seventeenth century. A Polk Family Tree published in 1849 (copy in William Polk Papers, NCDAH) indicates that the William Polk who moved to Pennsylvania and became progenitor of the North Carolina Polks was a son of John Polk, the son of Robert Bruce Polk, the original seventeenth century immigrant to Maryland. More recent investigation by William Harrison Polk reveals that William, the son of John, the son of Robert Bruce, lived and died in Maryland. The same investigator suggests that William Polk of Pennsylvania was a hitherto unknown son of William Polk, another son of Robert Bruce Polk. *Polk Family and Kinsmen*, 16, 18, 204. This conclusion, however, is far from demonstrated. It seems that there were more branches of the Polk family in early eighteenth century Maryland than the genealogists have yet distinguished. Until better evidence is discovered, the statements of Colonel William Polk of North Carolina provide the most reliable information on his branch of the family. For the Scotch-Irish settlements in the Cumberland valley, see Wayland F. Dunaway, *The Scotch-Irish of Colonial Pennsylvania* (Chapel Hill, 1944), 60-64, 102-103, 107-108.

⁶ *Murphey Papers*, II, 400.

Thomas was soon joined by the rest of his family, along with many of their Pennsylvania neighbors. Three of his mother's sisters had married members of the Alexander clan, and the Alexanders poured into the Catawba country in such numbers that they were to dominate it, numerically, politically, and socially, for many generations. Nearly 300 Alexanders, their Old Testament names—Ezra, Moses, Elias, Abraham, Hezekiah, Adam, Abijah, and many another—proclaiming their ardent Presbyterianism, were to be recorded in this area by the Census of 1790. Indeed, as Doctor Ramsey, whose mother had been a Mecklenburg Alexander, was to recall, there were not enough Biblical names to go around. "So numerous were the tribe of Alexanders," he wrote, that "they had to be designated by their office—their trade or their middle name." Thus Mecklenburgers referred to "Governor Nat" to distinguish Governor Nathaniel Alexander from "Fuller Nat" or "Red Head Nat," and to "Clerk Isaac" to avoid confusing the veteran county clerk with his kinsman "Long Creek Isaac" Alexander.⁷

"The whole tribe of these Alexanders," as the pious Doctor Ramsey noted proudly, "were remarkable for the tenacity with which they adhered to the doctrines and order of presbytery." Such sectarian zeal was not nearly so marked among the Mecklenburg Polks. Indeed this and much else in their character may be explained by their need to set themselves apart somehow from their numerous Alexander neighbors. Was it perhaps deliberately that William Polk eschewed the Alexandrian Biblicism in giving his older sons such conventional names as William, John, Thomas, and Charles? Only the youngest boy, Ezekiel, was christened under the Alexandrian spell, and he turned out to be a singularly inappropriate choice for this distinction.

Ezekiel was only six when the family made its long journey to the North Carolina frontier. William Polk the elder seems to have died shortly after reaching the new country, and the older children quickly left the parental roof to marry, clear farms, and raise families of their own. William's widow could hardly have supported herself and little Ezekiel from the occasional fees she received as a midwife, and it seems that both of them were taken into the household of Thomas, the most prosperous of the brothers.⁸

⁷ William B. Hesseltine, ed., *Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey: Autobiography and Letters* (Nashville, 1954), 286-289; Bureau of the Census, *Heads of Families at the First Census Taken in the Year 1790* (12 vols., Washington, 1908), xi, 158-164.

⁸ Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 3. For mention of the various Polks in North Carolina

IV

Though Virginians had been coming down the old Trading Path to barter with the Catawba and Cherokee Indians since the early part of the century, the pioneer farmers who arrived with the Polks found the gently rolling land still covered with hardwood forests and virgin savannahs. The wilderness quickly gave way as these vigorous Scotch-Irishmen cleared the bottom lands along the creeks. They found the red clay soil fertile, and their log cabins rose on the nearby slopes wherever springs afforded a convenient supply of clear, cold water.

Through the 1750's and 1760's the stream of Scotch-Irish immigrants into the southern uplands grew steadily larger, and as the choice locations in the Sugar Creek country were preempted, it poured over the provincial boundary. Among these later comers were the parents of Andrew Jackson, who stopped in the Waxhaw community only a few miles south of the Polks, and the parents of John C. Calhoun, who pushed on across the Catawba into the rolling hills of western South Carolina.

Presbyterians almost to a man, the Sugar Creek Scotch-Irish could not bear to be without regular worship according to the forms of their denomination. Makeshift preaching stands in the woods had to serve in the earliest days, but within a few years they were replaced by little meeting houses. Around these crude buildings were

see: affidavit of William Davidson in pension papers of Charles Polk, Veterans Administration Section (NA); Walter Clark, ed., *The State Records of North Carolina* (vols. XI-XXVI, Winston and Goldsboro, 1895-1905), XXII, 437; Bureau of the Census, *Heads of Families*, XI, 162; Polk entries in Card Index to Land Grants (NCSS); John Polk entries in Anson County, N.C., Index to Deeds, Grantees, 1749-1900, microfilm (NCDAH); Mecklenburg County, Record of Deeds, First Series, Bk. 2, pp. 637-639; *Polk Family and Kinsmen*, 192-195; receipt by Margaret Polk, 10 Aug. 1767, Estate of Samuel Bigers, in Mecklenburg County, N.C., Settlements of Estates (NCDAH).

The most reliable Polk genealogies are Wilmot Polk Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk and His Descendents," typescript copies (LC and THS); and Mrs. Frank M. Angellotti, "The Polks of North Carolina and Tennessee," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, LXXVII (1923), 133-145, 213-227, 250-270, LXXVIII (1924), 33-53, 159-177, 318-330.

John Polk married in 1758 and Charles four years later. John settled near Rocky River, some miles to the east of Sugar Creek; he was later a government agent among the Catawba Indians, living in South Carolina, where in 1803 his widow recorded her will (York County, S.C., Will Book 1, p. 159, Courthouse, York, S.C.). Charles established himself above John's original farm on Rocky River. Both of these sites were in Anson County. Their brother William had married before coming to North Carolina, and where he lived has not been discovered. The three sisters married respectively Samuel McLeary, Benjamin Alexander, and Robert McRea.

organized the seven congregations that became the focal points of life in the Catawba country. Everyone, pious or not, attended church to learn the latest news, make trades, or simply visit, though the faithful tried strenuously to prevent such secular intrusions on the holy Sabbath, forbidding even the cracking of walnuts. Much of Saturday was devoted to preparation for the Sabbath. All the food that would be needed was prepared ahead of time, boots and shoes were blacked, and firewood was cut and piled near the door. All of this culminated Saturday evening in a family service of spiritual preparation, and for communion Sundays the preparation was extended back to Friday, when every communicant was expected to keep a fast and attend the meeting house to hear a preparation sermon.⁹

This stern piety made for strong men and women, the only kind who could prosper on the turbulent Catawba frontier. Indian raids in the 1750's were followed in the next decade by rioting over lands and taxes; and these troubles were hardly past when the Carolina upcountry was plunged into civil war. Callous exploitation by corrupt courthouse rings, in league with the province's dominant tide-water politicians, had goaded thousands of the humbler interior people into an open revolt that ended only in pitched battle at Alamance Creek in 1771. However the Scotch-Irish along the Catawba made an advantageous alliance with Governor William Tryon and the lowcountry leaders against the insurgent Regulators. The rebels complained bitterly that "the Gov. gives Commissions making one Col. Alexander, and another Capt. Alexander and another Alexander Esq. Justice of the Peace &c. &c.—and all this to take in a large body of Presbyterians"; but the protests did not deter the Polks and their neighbors from accepting these and other favors or from marching with the governor's army against their desperate countrymen.¹⁰

Ezekiel Polk grew up in the midst of this turbulence, for his

⁹ Daniel A. Tompkins, *History of Mecklenburg County and the City of Charlotte from 1740-1903* (2 vols., Charlotte, 1903), I, 15-27; William Henry Foote, *Sketches of North Carolina, Historical and Biographical* . . . (New York, 1846), 79-81, 168-170, 183-190; Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 288.

¹⁰ William K. Boyd, ed., *Some Eighteenth Century Tracts Concerning North Carolina* (Raleigh, 1927), 348; Tompkins, *Mecklenburg*, I, 8-14; Charles Town *South Carolina Gazette*, 21 July 1756, 12 May 1759; William L. Saunders, ed., *The Colonial Records of North Carolina* (10 vols., Raleigh, 1886-1890), VII, 6, 10, 14-35, 1004; Henry Eustace McCulloh to Edmund Fanning [April 1765], Fanning-McCulloh Letters (SHC).

brother Thomas was rapidly becoming the most prominent man in the Sugar Creek country. Thomas Polk was the chief promoter of the new county of Mecklenburg, formed in 1762, one of its original magistrates, and a captain in the provincial militia. The little county seat town of Charlotte was established under his sponsorship, and he served in Mecklenburg's delegation to the provincial assembly every year save one from 1766 to 1774.¹¹

Captain Polk did more for his youngest brother than furnish him an example of backwoods leadership. By 1769, when Ezekiel was twenty-two, the frontier had moved so far toward the mountains that a new county was organized across the Catawba and named for the governor with whom the Polks had recently allied themselves. Thomas Polk's counterpart on the other side of the river was his brother-in-law, Captain Thomas Neal, and the two of them together seem to have controlled the new county's patronage. At any rate Ezekiel appeared at the first meeting of the Tryon County court bearing a commission from Governor Tryon naming him clerk of court, a lucrative and politically important office in eighteenth century local government.¹²

The young politician's new eminence enabled him to take a wife, Maria ("Nanny") Wilson, daughter of a wealthy farmer in the northern end of Mecklenburg. Establishing his bride on a 200-acre farm near the southern border of the new county, Ezekiel settled down to increase his worldly goods and political influence. His family was growing along with his local consequence. In 1770 Maria presented him with twins, Thomas and Matilda; and two years later a second son, Samuel, was born.¹³

Just at this auspicious moment Ezekiel's fair prospects were unexpectedly blasted. In 1772 the disputed provincial boundary was at last surveyed, and both Thomas Neal and Ezekiel found to their dismay that they were living in South Carolina. But these aggressive Scotch-Irishmen were not to be stopped by any such mischance. Within a year or two Thomas Neal was colonel and Ezekiel was

¹¹ Albert Ray Newsome, "Thomas Polk," in Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography* (21 vols., New York, 1937), xv, 42; Tompkins, *Mecklenburg*, I, 31-34.

¹² Tryon County, N.C., Minute Book, Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, 1769-1779, microfilm (NCDAH), July Term, 1769.

¹³ Chalmers G. Davidson, *Major John Davidson of "Rural Hill,"* . . . (Charlotte, 1943), 6-7. For the location of Ezekiel's Tryon plantation, see Land Book 22, p. 22 (NCSS); also, assignments of road overseers, Tryon Court Minutes, October Term, 1769, and April Term, 1771. Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 15, 24, 59, 66.

lieutenant colonel in the militia organization of the New Acquisition, as South Carolina called the district she had acquired under the boundary settlement.¹⁴ But once again, just when Ezekiel's prospects were brightening, forces he could not control intervened, with unhappy consequences for his personal fortunes.

V

However unprepossessing the Mecklenburg of Jimmy Polk's boyhood may have seemed, Mecklenburgers were not apologetic. They had been, as they conceived, actors in history's most momentous drama, the war between tyranny and liberty; and they lived in the lingering glory of that great struggle. In 1800, heroes still walked among them, were indeed their neighbors, cousins, uncles, and brothers. Mecklenburgers never tired of recounting gleefully the rout of a sizeable British foraging party by a dozen farmers at the McIntyre place; or how, when the enemy was forced to evacuate Charlotte in 1780, a reluctant guide had got Lord Cornwallis's entire army lost in the tangled thickets along lower Sugar Creek. Naturally Mecklenburgers took pride in the epithet, "hornet's nest," that his lordship had bestowed upon their troublesome county.

Yet the Revolution was more than a hallowed memory. The liberty Mecklenburgers had fought for in the seventies was a way of life, an agrarian individualism, that still had to be defended. Their votes for Jefferson were a reaffirmation of the lofty principles so ringingly declared in 'seventy-five and so indelibly burned into their consciousness by seven years of privation, hatred, and bloodshed.

The sons and grandsons of Mecklenburg had special reason for this unusually passionate identification of their social values with the revolutionary heritage. Wherever they went they carried with them the conviction that their revolutionary forebears had been the first Americans anywhere to declare their independence from the British king. The news of fighting at Lexington and Concord had no sooner reached the Sugar Creek country than a meeting was called to adopt the celebrated resolves of May 31, 1775. "All Commissions, civil and military, heretofore granted by the Crown, to be exercised in these Colonies," the Mecklenburgers declared, "are wholly null and void, and the Constitution of each Colony wholly suspended."

¹⁴ Marvin L. Skaggs, *North Carolina Boundary Disputes Involving Her Southern Line* (Chapel Hill, 1941), 74-97; Edward McCrady, *The History of South Carolina in the Revolution, 1775-1780* (New York, 1901), 11n.

Suiting their actions to the boldness of their words, they promptly created a revolutionary committee to supplant the legal county government constituted under Crown authority.¹⁵

The Polks had played a prominent part in these proceedings and in the fighting that followed. Thomas Polk was a ringleader in the initial revolutionary agitation, and it was he who had called the meeting to adopt the Mecklenburg Resolves. He and his son William became colonel and major respectively in the Continental line, and Thomas was subsequently commissary general for Horatio Gates' ill-fated southern army. Two of the other Polk brothers, Charles and John, served honorably as militia captains.¹⁶

Ezekiel's revolutionary career was more checkered. His youthful days in Thomas Polk's comfortable home had been, as he later admitted, "spent in pleasure," a result to which Thomas's pack of frolicsome sons no doubt contributed. Thomas had provided his youngest brother with a good education, and some people regarded Ezekiel as the most talented of all the Polks. Impulsive, nimble-witted, fiercely independent, and eloquent, he had an ability to sweep others along with him in his various enthusiasms. But he lacked the persevering qualities of the more commonplace members of his clan, and this failing was frequently his undoing.¹⁷

In the early months of the revolutionary crisis, Ezekiel joined heartily with the lowcountry leaders of the patriot party in South Carolina, attending the provincial congress at Charlestown in June 1775 and accepting a captain's commission in the mounted regiment organized to keep the upcountry from going over to the king. He had hardly reached the patriot camp, however, when he was enraged by an order to march the upcountry troops to the coast to meet a threatened invasion. His men had not enlisted to protect the plantations of lowcountry nabobs, snorted Captain Polk, and he "would

¹⁵ William Henry Hoyt, *The Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence . . .* (New York, 1907), 271. This authoritative study of a long-vexed question demolishes the myth of a "Declaration of Independence" on 20 May 1775, but leaves unquestioned the radical resolves adopted on 31 May 1775.

¹⁶ Newsome, "Thomas Polk," *loc.cit.*, 42; J. G. de R. Hamilton, "William Polk," *Dictionary of American Biography*, xv, 43-44; Pension Papers of Charles Polk and Charles Polk (of Texas), Veterans Administration Section (NA).

¹⁷ Quotation from the epitaph Ezekiel composed for his own tombstone as printed in Jackson (Tennessee) *Gazette*, 13 Sept. 1824; [Tennessee Democratic Central Committee, comp.], *Vindication of the Revolutionary Character and Services of the Late Col. Ezekiel Polk, of Mecklenburg, N.C.*, pamphlet (Nashville [1844]), 14.

not sacrifice their Healths for no Council of Safety's Parading notions." Whereupon he marched his company home.¹⁸

This was treason, as Ezekiel quickly perceived, and it was only by taking charge of the ruthless coercion of neutrals and loyalists that he persuaded the patriot leaders to restore his commission. Though he participated creditably in several campaigns against the loyalists and Indians, Ezekiel was never able to regain the confidence of his patriot neighbors, and in 1776 he moved his family back to Mecklenburg. Buying a 260-acre farm from his brother Thomas, he settled down on the east side of Sugar Creek, some nine miles down the Great Post Road from Charlotte.¹⁹

Luckily for his family, Ezekiel's instability did not carry over into economic activities; to the accumulation of property he devoted himself with a single-mindedness worthy of the noblest cause. By this time the theater of war had moved off to the north, leaving Mecklenburg relatively undisturbed. Ezekiel was able to concentrate on farming, and in 1778 he opened a tavern on the courthouse square in Charlotte. His appointment the following year as justice of the

¹⁸ Alexander S. Salley, Jr., ed., "Papers of the First Council of Safety of the Revolutionary Party in South Carolina, June-November, 1775," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, I (1900), 69. Information on Ezekiel's career in South Carolina is drawn from the following: A. S. Salley, Jr., ed., "Historical Notes," *ibid.*, V (1904), 189-190, VII (1906), 103-107; "Extracts from the Journal of the South Carolina Provincial Congress of June, 1775," copied into a notebook in James K. Polk Papers, Second Series (LC; hereafter cited as Polk Papers, which refers to First Series unless otherwise indicated); McCrady, *S.C. in Revolution, 1775-1780*, 13-14, 37; "Journal of the Council of Safety for the Province of South Carolina, 1775," *Collections of the South Carolina Historical Society*, II (1858), 24-26, 37; "Papers of Council of Safety," *loc.cit.*, I (1900), 47, 69-71, 192, II (1901), 103, 261-262, III (1902), 3-4, 171; *Murphey Papers*, II, 201, 401-403; John Drayton, ed., *Memoirs of the American Revolution . . .* (2 vols., Charleston, 1821), I, 323; A. S. Salley, Jr., *The History of Orangeburg County, South Carolina, from Its First Settlement to the Close of the Revolutionary War* (Orangeburg, 1898), 389, 395, 406-407, 414, 416-419, 424-425, 434; R. W. Gibbes, ed., *Documentary History of the American Revolution . . .* (3 vols., Columbia, S.C., and New York, 1853-1857), I, 133, 137, 147, 151, 227, 240, II, 27; A. S. Salley, Jr., ed., *Col. William Hill's Memoirs of the Revolution* (Columbia, S.C., 1929), 29-30; *American Archives*, Fourth Series, IV, 28, 31, 33, 40-48, V, 578, Fifth Series, I, 458; *Vindication of Ezekiel Polk*, 14.

¹⁹ A. S. Salley, Jr., ed., *Journal of the General Assembly of South Carolina, September 17, 1776-October 20, 1776* (Columbia, 1909), 161 and passim, shows that Ezekiel was elected to this body but did not attend. The deed from Thomas Polk to Ezekiel Polk, dated 3 Oct. 1776, of 260 acres for £300, lists both men as being "of Mecklenburg." Mecklenburg Deeds, Second Series, Bk. 5, p. 232. The family graveyard where Ezekiel buried his first wife and at least two of his children may be seen today in the dense woods about two miles northwest of the town of Pineville, just east of Sugar Creek, and fixes the location of his plantation.

peace indicated that for the third time in a decade he was winning consequence in a new community.²⁰

It was not long, however, before the war again intervened in Ezekiel's fortunes. With Lord Cornwallis's invasion of South Carolina in the summer of 1780 and the disastrous American defeat at Camden in August, the Mecklenburg militia was called out for operations against the loyalists rallying west of the Catawba and for gallant guerrilla action against the inexorable advance of the enemy's main army. Though he took the field himself on several occasions, Ezekiel more characteristically joined the Presbyterian clergy in haranguing the militia and "exhorting them to be true to their country." But when, on September 26, the British army marched past his farm into Charlotte, Ezekiel's own patriotism failed. Cornwallis had chosen the only painted building in the village, Thomas Polk's "White House," as his headquarters, and there Ezekiel went to save his property by "taking protection," promising to remain peaceably at home and cooperate with the invaders.²¹

Eleven days later fortune again turned against Ezekiel. The annihilation of Cornwallis's left wing at Kings Mountain forced a British withdrawal, and only Ezekiel's family connections saved him from punishment by the resentful Whigs. Nevertheless he managed to restore himself to the good graces of his neighbors by some service in the final stages of the war, for in 1782 the Mecklenburg magistrates, with only two dissenting votes, elected him sheriff, the most important office at their disposal. But the day after his election he was back before the justices complaining loudly about the condition of the jail, and within three months the unpredictable Ezekiel had resigned.²²

VI

With the war won and independence established, the victors pro-

²⁰ Mecklenburg Deeds, First Series, Bk. 36, p. 80; Mecklenburg County, N.C., Minute Book, Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, 1774-1785, entries for 16 Oct. 1778 and Oct. Term, 1779.

²¹ Raleigh *North Carolina Standard*, 18 Sept. 1844; *Vindication of Ezekiel Polk*, 9-14; Thomas G. Polk to Bishop Leonidas Polk, 21 June [1852], and Benson J. Lossing to Bishop Leonidas Polk, 12 June 1852, Polk Family of North Carolina Papers (LC).

²² *Vindication of Ezekiel Polk*, 9-13; Revolutionary Vouchers (NCDAH), Salisbury District, No. 5188, to Ezekiel Polk for militia services; Revolutionary Accounts (NCDAH), Vol. vi, fo. 88, p. 1, Vol. xii, fo. 26, p. 4, and fo. 31, p. 4, to Ezekiel Polk; Mecklenburg Court Minutes, 1774-1785, 10-11 Apr. 1782 and July Term, 1782.

ceeded to reap the spoils; in the sequel Ezekiel and his descendants were to become Tennesseans. The great prize was North Carolina's wilderness domain stretching west from the mountains to the Mississippi. Before the war was over the legislature set aside part of this territory to satisfy soldiers' land bounty warrants, most of which quickly fell into the hands of speculator-politicians. The rest of the vast area was disposed of by an act of 1783, under which millions of acres went for a song to a handful of insiders. The architect of this colossal grab was William Blount, an eastern politician with an eye to the main chance, and prominent among his associates was Thomas Polk of Mecklenburg.

Thomas Polk was typical of a large group of aggressive men who had come to the fore in the North Carolina backcountry. By virtue of the oligarchic structure of county government and through alliance with the tidewater leaders who ran provincial affairs, these men had been able to organize courthouse rings that dominated the interior. It was these oligarchs of tidewater and backcountry, irritated at British interference with their efforts to manage provincial affairs for their own benefit, who initiated and led the revolutionary movement in North Carolina. But to many other North Carolinians the Revolution meant a quickening and partial fulfillment of democratic aspirations, and this ambivalence of purpose paved the way for many future conflicts.

The popular element first emerged as a force in North Carolina politics at the 1776 election for a provincial congress to form a state constitution. In Mecklenburg this contest pitted Thomas Polk against a popular faction led by the Alexanders. The Alexanders won, mainly it seems by branding Polk as "a home-bred lord" who "has been much employed in public services, in all of which he was ever mindful of his own private emolument." What was at stake in this election was revealed more clearly when the Alexanders called a public meeting and drafted a set of radical instructions for the Mecklenburg delegates. The new constitution must provide, the delegates were told, for universal manhood suffrage, annual assemblies, direct election of local officials, and—a typically Alexandrian demand—strict religious qualifications for holding office. The conservatives, however, won a partial victory in the convention, and Thomas Polk retained his influence with the state leaders, despite his loss of support at home. So it happened that Thomas Polk was

on hand to join William Blount and other insiders in lobbying their grand speculative scheme through the legislature of 1783.²³

The land act of 1783 ostensibly threw open most of what was to become the state of Tennessee for sale to all comers, but few outside the Blount circle were prepared to take advantage of its ingeniously drawn provisions. Payment was to be made in the discredited state and continental notes, which no one except the speculators had had the foresight to amass. A grant could be obtained only by: (1) employing a locator in the western country to prepare an entry, or rough description of a desirable tract; (2) then filing the entry with a special office at Hillsborough, hundreds of miles from the western country, and receiving a warrant of survey; (3) having the warrant surveyed by an official surveyor in the western country; and, finally, (4) returning the plat of survey to the North Carolina secretary of state. Since the various officials were themselves involved in the Great Speculation, they used this complicated procedure to bar interlopers, while winking at irregularities by their associates.

Planned with the utmost care, the Great Speculation was executed with remarkable dispatch. In May 1784 the Blount faction persuaded the legislature to suspend the land act and cede the whole western territory to the Confederation authorities, provided that they make good all warrants already issued, as well as any military warrants to be issued in the future. In seven short months more than three million acres had been entered, practically all of it by insiders who were organized and had locators in the field. These warrants of 1783, moreover, were to demonstrate an astonishing capacity for expansion and self-proliferation; by the time they were all perfected into grants, they would cover practically all the desirable acreage in the Tennessee country.²⁴

The Polks were deeply involved in the Great Speculation as partners with the Blounts and as members of several land companies organized by other members of the Blount group. With advance

²³ James H. Moore, *Defence of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence . . .* (Raleigh, 1908), 147-157; *ibid.*, 123-128; Hoyt, *Mecklenburg Declaration*, 113-116; Samuel A'Court Ashe, *History of North Carolina* (2 vols., Greensboro and Raleigh, 1925), I, 556-559; John H. Wheeler, *Historical Sketches of North Carolina* (reprint edn., 2 vols. in 1, New York, 1925), II, 260-262.

²⁴ Thomas P. Abernethy, *From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee: A Study in Frontier Democracy* (Chapel Hill, 1932), 35-59; Alice Barnwell Keith, "Three North Carolina Blount Brothers in Business and Politics, 1783-1812," Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina (1940), 267; Albert Lincoln Bramlett, "North Carolina's Western Lands," Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina (1928), 91-93, 118-120, 131-136.

knowledge of what was coming, one of these companies had its locators in the field a full year before the scheme became law. As soon as the act was passed, Thomas Polk took his four sons into the western wilderness to join the race for the best lands, at the same time buying up soldiers' claims for location in the military district. Through the Blount influence, Thomas Polk was elected to the Council of State by this same legislature and reelected the next year. His brother Ezekiel was chosen as one of the surveyors to run the boundary of the military district, and his son William as one of the three official surveyors for the western country. So closely were the speculators tied in with the leaders of the infant settlements across the mountains that William Polk had no sooner reached his new post than he was elected to represent the frontier county of Davidson in the North Carolina assembly.²⁵

Ezekiel Polk did not rank high enough in political circles to share directly in these fruits of liberty. He had been initiated into the charmed circle of provincial oligarchs back in his Tryon County days, but having lost his chance for prominence he now had to content himself with such favors as his powerful brother threw his way. The first of these, the appointment as surveyor of the military boundary in 1783, must have been especially gratifying to a man of Ezekiel's temperament. Not only did this expedition into the wilderness across the mountains appeal to his strong spirit of adventure, but also he was to receive a princely tract of land for his services. Though Indian raids soon forced the surveyors to return home, Ezekiel never got over this first venture into the verdant country. At the earliest opportunity he bought the military

²⁵ *N.C. State Records*, xix, 185, 571, xxii, 152; Keith, "Blount Brothers," 266-267, 285, 295; Bramlett, "Western Lands," 68-76; Albert V. Goodpasture, "The Boyhood of President Polk," *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, vii (Apr. 1921), 43; grant to Ezekiel Polk, Land Grants, Middle District, File No. 3 (NCSS); Maury County, Tenn., Minutes of Circuit Court, 1810-1815 (wherever Tennessee county records are cited herein, the typescript copies in the State Library at Nashville have been used), 141; Maury County, Minutes of County Court, 1808-1809, pp. 76-79, entry for 19 Sept. 1809; Williamson County, Tenn., Minutes of County Court, 1800-1812, entry for 14 Oct. 1806; *Murphey Papers*, i, 176n., ii, 408; "Directions to Col Polk in the case of Polk vs Polk," 10 Oct. 1826, Polk Family Papers; articles of agreement between Thomas Polk and Elijah Robertson, 1, 3 June 1784, Polk-Yeatman Papers; resolutions of Memucan Hunt and Co., 1 Apr. 1789, *ibid.*; Stockley Donelson to Col. William Polk, 15 May 1790, *ibid.*; Joseph Johnson, *Traditions and Reminiscences Chiefly of the American Revolution in the South . . .* (Charleston, 1851), 85.

For the grantees, see Card Index to Tennessee Land Grants (NCSS); and Book of Warrants Issued by John Armstrong's Office, in the Tennessee Land Office, Nashville. The latter is more nearly complete.

bounty right to a tract north of the Cumberland, on a branch of the Sulphur fork of the Red River, in what would later be Robertson County.²⁶

Meanwhile Ezekiel's family was growing; his fourth daughter and eighth child was born in 1790. The placid life on the Sugar Creek plantation, however, only made Ezekiel more restless. In 1790 he secured an appointment as deputy surveyor of land grants in the western country, and in August he packed up his family for the arduous journey over the mountains to settle on the military grant he had bought a few years before.

The Great Speculation was just entering a new phase. Since most of the tracts claimed during those seven feverish months of 1783-1784 were in Indian country and could not be surveyed and granted for many years to come, the speculators were determined to control the area, so as to defend and, wherever possible, inflate their claims. Thus when the federal government organized the Tennessee country as the Southwest Territory in 1790, William Blount got himself appointed territorial governor. Blount and his associates, in fact, were to dominate the area, as territory and state, for three decades to come. As late as the 1820's, when James K. Polk entered public life, politics and legislation would still revolve around the same Great Speculation that led his grandfather west in 1790, just as the Southwest Territory was being organized. Ezekiel had no sooner reached his new home than Governor Blount, doubtless at Thomas Polk's instance, appointed him one of the nine magistrates for the county where his lands lay.²⁷

Only ten years before, the original pioneers in the Red River country had been driven off by bloody Indian raids, but the Indian menace had abated temporarily, and immigrants were now coming in large numbers. Once he got his cabin built and his family established, Ezekiel was kept busy surveying tracts for other newcomers, leaving his older boys and the Negro slaves to clear fields for spring planting. Yet the winter's hard work went for naught when Ezekiel's beloved Maria became seriously ill. Hoping that old friends

²⁶ Grants to Ezekiel Polk, Land Grants, Middle District, File No. 3, and Davidson County, Tenn., File No. 220 (NCSS).

²⁷ Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 105; Stockley Donelson to Col. William Polk, 15 May 1790, Polk-Yeatman Papers; Ezekiel Polk's bond as deputy surveyor, 25 Aug. 1790, Polk Family Papers; Col. William Polk to Col. Robert Hays, 16 Aug. 1790, Miscellaneous Papers (NCDAH); Clarence E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, Vol. iv, *The Territory South of the River Ohio, 1790-1795* (Washington, 1936), 441-442.

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and familiar surroundings might arrest her decline, the Polks moved back to Mecklenburg before they were able to gather their first crop on the Red River.²⁸ But Maria was beyond recovery and died in the fall of 1791, leaving the disconsolate Ezekiel to record his grief in the eight lines of funereal verse he composed for her elaborately carved tombstone:

Here unalarm'd at Death's last Stroke
Lies in this tomb MARIA POLK
A tender Mother virtuous Wife
Resign'd in every Scene of life
Truly pious without parade
Where want appear'd she lent her Aid
To heavenly Courts she did repair
May those she lov'd all meet her there²⁹

In less than a year, however, Ezekiel had married again. Not one of the several children his new wife bore him survived infancy, and again Ezekiel vented his grief in doggerel epitaphs:

Beneath this Slab lies here Interr'd
An Innocent that never Err'd
A Mothers Hope in racking pain
A Sixth time blasted are again
April the 2d. 1793
Still born son of EZEKIEL POLK³⁰

Meanwhile the older sons and daughters were leaving the Sugar Creek plantation to marry and set up for themselves.

VII

The Polks were often the scandal of their more conventional neighbors. The influence of wives taken from among Wilsons, Spratts, and Alexanders was usually enough to keep the restive Polk men up to the minimum standards of behavior prescribed by a Presbyterian community and occasionally to produce sons and daughters of a circumspect Alexandrian cast. But now and again

²⁸ A deed dated 28 June 1791 lists Ezekiel Polk as being again a resident of Mecklenburg. For conditions on the Red River at this time, see Albert V. Goodpasture, "Beginnings of Montgomery County," *American Historical Magazine* (Nashville), viii (July 1903), 193-205; and "The Correspondence of Gen. James Robertson," *ibid.*, i (Oct. 1896), 284-285.

²⁹ Gravestone of Maria Polk, Polk Graveyard, near Pineville, N.C.

³⁰ Gravestones of Eliza Polk and "Still born son of EZEKIEL POLK," Polk Graveyard. The name of Ezekiel's second wife is given variously as Bessie Davis and Polly Campbell.

an ungovernable strain in the family line would erupt in the impetuous enthusiasms of an Ezekiel Polk or the madcap pranks that distinguished Thomas Polk's son "Devil Charley" from another kinsman, "Civil Charley" Polk.⁸¹

Ezekiel's second son, Sam, turned out to be one of the sober, conventional Polks, though his conventionality took the form of a passion for this world's goods, rather than his neighbors' zeal for the Presbyterian God. Sam had had a good education for the time and place, probably at Charlotte's Liberty Hall Academy, and he developed into the sturdy, level-headed kind of youth upon whom careful fathers are not afraid to bestow their daughters. So like Ezekiel before him, he was able to seek a wife among the prosperous, orthodox farmers of Hopewell congregation in the northern end of Mecklenburg. It was probably on a visit to his Wilson kin, perhaps while attending church with them, that Sam met Jane Knox.

The Knoxes represented perfectly the Scottish Presbyterian tradition suggested by their family name. Jane's father, James Knox, impressed his neighbors as being "remarkable for his piety" and for "his extreme care and fidelity in the religious education and culture of his children in the doctrine and order of the Presbyterian Church." He had been a militia captain during the Revolution, and Mecklenburgers long celebrated his courageous charge up to the muzzle of a British cannon at the Battle of Hanging Rock. Since the war, hard work at farming and blacksmithing had made him well-to-do, and the Hopewell community recognized him as one of its leading citizens. His grandson and namesake, James Knox Polk, was to resemble him more than he would any other immediate ancestor, a resemblance which the younger man would acknowledge by taking special pride in his maternal grandfather, and more particularly in Grandfather Knox's military record, as contrasted with Grandfather Ezekiel Polk's.⁸²

To the canny Captain Knox and his nineteen-year-old daughter, twenty-two-year-old Sam Polk must have seemed an excellent marital prospect; and Sam's courtship had almost won its object when suddenly, in October 1794, James Knox died in the full vigor of his middle years, leaving behind a wife and four children and a considerable estate, including ten slaves. The impatient young people de-

⁸¹ Johnson, *Traditions and Reminiscences*, 83-85.

⁸² Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 270-271; Hattie S. Goodman, *The Knox Family . . .* (Richmond, 1905), 30-35, 114, 118; *Vindication of Ezekiel Polk*, 9; *N.C. State Records*, xix, 973-974.

layed their plans only ten weeks. Sam's older brother, Thomas, was also bringing his courtship of a Hopewell girl to a successful conclusion, and a double wedding was arranged for Christmas night. The ceremony was probably performed at the Widow Knox's and followed, as was the custom, by a big country party.³³

Ezekiel presented his newly married sons with adjacent 250-acre farms on Little Sugar Creek, several miles south of his own plantation; while Jane received from her father's estate two Negro girls, a feather bed, three cows and calves, a mare, a saddle and bridle, a third of his household furniture, and a fifth of his undivided estate. So the young people were off to a flying start as they moved into their cabin and set about the business of raising crops and children. Brother Thomas and his wife stole a march on Sam with the birth of a daughter the following October, but Jenny Polk was not far behind, her oldest son being born about noon on the second of November, 1795. It was altogether fitting that Jenny was allowed to name this first child, who was to be so unlike the Ezekiels and the Devil Charleys of the Polk clan, James Knox Polk.³⁴

The birth of her baby brought Jenny Polk face to face with an aspect of life among the Polks that would sadden the rest of her days. The thing people remembered about Jenny was her piety, "her theological acumen, her vigorous and masculine intellect, her great tenacity of Presbyterianism." Her chief pleasure, as Sam soon learned, was in "the Bible, the Confession of Faith, the Psalms and Watt's Hymns."³⁵ The first thing such a mother would think about was the baptism of her child, but as soon as this issue was raised, Jenny learned that she could never feel altogether at home with the Polks.

³³ Gravestone of James Knox, Cemetery of Hopewell Church, Mecklenburg County, N.C.; Mecklenburg County, N.C., Record of Wills, Bk. D, 135-137; Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 15, 59; *Polk Family and Kinsmen*, 192; Hunter, *Sketches of Western N.C.*, 93; Goodman, *Knox Family*, 114; J. B. Alexander, *Biographical Sketches of the Early Settlers of the Hopewell Section and Reminiscences of the Pioneers and Their Descendants by Families* (Charlotte, 1897), 92.

³⁴ Mecklenburg Deeds, Second Series, Bk. 14, pp. 163, 310; Mecklenburg Court Minutes, 1796-1808, entry for 26 Oct. 1796; Mecklenburg Wills, Bk. D, 135-137; Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 15, 59; Milo M. Quaife, ed., *The Diary of James K. Polk during His Presidency, 1845 to 1849* (4 vols., Chicago, 1910), I, 86, II, 216. Sam Polk's farm was not actually deeded to him until 1796, the consideration being five shillings.

It is possible that Jane Polk went back to her mother's to have her first child, though the highly circumstantial argument to this effect in J. B. Alexander, *Hopewell Section*, 92-94, is unconvincing. "It is sufficient to be born in Mecklenburg to entitle one to all that is good and patriotic," writes this local historian, "but to be born in the Hopewell boundary adds eclat to the fact."

³⁵ Ramsey, *Autobiography*, 270-271.

Sam had not been antireligious; indeed, in that first year of married life Jenny probably had little trouble persuading her devoted husband to take her the seven miles to Providence meeting house for Sunday services. Unfortunately Providence congregation was ruled by an iron-willed young parson, the Reverend James Wallis, who was described as "clear, strong, ardent, and more dreaded though less loved."³⁶ Wallis was little disposed to let any of his hearers rest comfortably in a state of religious indifference, and Sam doubtless took offense at the minister's pointed allusions to himself. Before long, Polk resentment of the Presbyterian clergy's theocratic pretensions was to produce an explosion that would rock the Sugar Creek country to its foundations.

When Jenny somehow persuaded Sam to take her baby to Providence for baptism, the infant James K. Polk became the focus for one of the most acerbating incidents in this mounting friction. Presbyterians had always insisted on a profession of faith by the parents of a child presented for baptism, and Parson Wallis was hardly the man to abate this requirement. The inevitable result was a violent quarrel between Sam and the parson. Little Jimmy was taken home unbaptized; and knowledge of this episode was to leave such deep scars that he would not receive the sacrament of baptism until he lay on his death bed.³⁷

The matter might have ended in armed neutrality had Sam alone been concerned, for he was not by nature a radical. But Ezekiel Polk had his own reasons for taking a hand in the controversy, and he was not one for halfway measures. Outwardly Ezekiel had been orthodox enough up to the time of Maria's death, his nascent religious radicalism having been restrained by her piety, which was remarkable even for a daughter of Alexandrian Hopewell. "The last Exercises of her feeble voice," Maria's epitaph reported, "were employed in singing the 33rd Hymn of the 2d Book of Doctr. Watts Composition: in which, anticipating the Joys of the blessed Society above, she exchanged the earthly for the Heavenly Melody."

But Maria's departure and the death of all Ezekiel's children by his second wife produced a profound disillusionment with orthodoxy. The childbirth loss of his babies made the Presbyterian doctrine of infant damnation particularly abhorrent; and his characterization of one of these unfortunates as "An Innocent that never Err'd"

³⁶ Foote, *Sketches of N.C.*, 248.

³⁷ O. P. Fitzgerald, *John B. McFerrin: A Biography* (Nashville, 1893), 222, 230.

doubtless expressed a conscious dissent, especially since he appended to his own crude verses on the child's tombstone a ten-line verse from another source celebrating the infant's flight to heaven.³⁸

Yet even those who knew him best were shocked when Ezekiel made himself the champion of that archheresy, deism, and proceeded to plunge Presbyterian Mecklenburg into a bitter broil. He and his neighbor Ezra Alexander, the family rebel, organized a debating society that met up and down Sugar Creek, turning the light of reason on Biblical revelation; and Ezekiel personally contributed a circulating library containing such deistic writers as Gibbon, Hume, and Paine. Parson Wallis and Samuel C. Caldwell, the pastor at nearby Sugar Creek church, led the counterattack from both pulpit and printing press, Wallis publishing an elaborate pamphlet to expose the errors of Paine's *Age of Reason*.

The controversy was rendered even sharper by various social and family rivalries that became involved, for both Wallis and Caldwell had consolidated their sacerdotal authority by marrying daughters of the leader of the Alexander clan. And the whole affair bore with added intensity on poor Jenny Polk when her mother, the Widow Knox, found a new husband in none other than Parson Wallis's father. The battle raged for five years, with first one side and then the other gaining an advantage.³⁹ First fall went to the orthodox, when a recurrence of Ezekiel's Tennessee fever enabled Parson Wallis to deal him a body blow.

VIII

During the summer of 1797, while the religious controversy was at fever pitch, a certain John Johnson arrived in Mecklenburg from Tennessee and began stirring up interest in a proposed settlement in the great bend of the Tennessee River near Muscle Shoals. The lands were a part of the notorious Yazoo grants made by the Georgia legislature two years before, but the grants lay in Indian territory where settlement was forbidden by federal law. This fact had not deterred Zachariah Cox, the father of the project, from attempting to raise a small army, or from building near Knoxville

³⁸ Gravestone of "Still born son of EZEKIEL POLK," Polk Graveyard.

³⁹ Foote, *Sketches of N.C.*, 248-249; J. B. Alexander, *The History of Mecklenburg County from 1740 to 1900* (Charlotte, 1902), 78, 281-282; James Wallis, *The Bible Defended* . . . (Halifax, N.C., 1797); William M. Clemens, comp., *North and South Carolina Marriage Records from the Earliest Colonial Days to the Civil War* (New York, 1927), 159; Mecklenburg Wills, Bk. A, 163.

a floating fortress armed with cannon to carry his men down the Tennessee River prepared to fight off Indians or anyone else who might try to bar their way. Cox's emissary was now promising a thousand acres to any man who would arm himself and stay with the enterprise for a year.⁴⁰

When Johnson described this grandiose but illegal project in Mecklenburg, Ezekiel's combustible imagination was fired, with consequences that would set the new United States government in Philadelphia trembling. Ezekiel was able to enlist about twenty-five Mecklenburgers, and in July they set out to join Cox near Knoxville. Just at this moment Parson Wallis got wind of the matter and saw a chance to strike a blow for religion. Consulting prominent Federalists in the neighborhood, he rushed off to the federal district judge a deposition hinting darkly that "from the mysterious manner in which the business has been conducted, much more is contemplated by the authors of it than is promulged, or perhaps generally suspected."⁴¹ The judge hurried a copy of the Wallis statement to Philadelphia, at the same time dispatching the federal marshal after Ezekiel and his followers.

The Adams administration was already nervous over an epidemic of unrest, plotting, and foreign intrigue in the turbulent Southwest. When Wallis's alarming information reached the capital, President Adams was at home in Massachusetts, but the jittery secretary of state, Timothy Pickering, dispatched him an urgent message pro-

⁴⁰ For the Cox expedition and Ezekiel's part in it, see the following: Isaac J. Cox, ed., "Documents Relating to Zachariah Cox," Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, *Quarterly Publication*, viii (1913), 29-114; Samuel C. Williams, ed., "Executive Journal of Gov. John Sevier," East Tennessee Historical Society, *Publications*, No. 1 (1929), 144-146, No. 2 (1930), 144-149, No. 3 (1931), 159-160, No. 5 (1933), 165-166; *American State Papers, Public Lands*, I, 232, 244; Col. William Polk to Gen. William R. Davie, 9 Aug. 1797, photostat, and Oliver Wolcott to James McHenry, 15 Sept. 1797, James McHenry Papers (LC); Timothy Pickering to Judge John Sitgreaves, 1 Aug. 1797, same to President John Adams, 3 Aug. 1797, same to the governors of N.C., S.C., and Ga., 3 Aug. 1797, copies, Pickering Papers (MHS); Timothy Pickering to the federal attorneys for N.C., S.C., and Ga., 3 Aug. 1797, same to James McHenry, 30 Sept. 1797, copies, State Department Domestic Letters (NA); proclamation of the governor of S.C., 24 Aug. 1797, and President John Adams to Timothy Pickering, 25 Aug. 1797, State Department Miscellaneous Letters (NA); Governor Samuel Ashe to Judge John Sitgreaves, 14 Aug. 1797, copy, same to Major Gen. Robert Smith, 18 Aug. 1797, copy, and minutes of the governor's council, 30 Aug. 1797, all in Governors' Letter Book and Journal of the Council of State, 1795-1855 (NCDAH); *Halifax North Carolina Journal*, 18, 25 Sept. 1797; J. G. M. Ramsey, *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* . . . (Charleston, 1853), 690.

⁴¹ Deposition of James Wallis, quoted in Timothy Pickering to the governors of N.C., S.C., and Ga., 3 Aug. 1797, copies, State Department Domestic Letters.

posing a proclamation to "warn the people of their danger." The same day Pickering called on the governors and federal district attorneys in the three southernmost states to take all necessary steps to stop this ominous enterprise, which, he emphasized, seemed to have some ulterior object. In response to his appeal, the public was warned through the newspapers; the governor of South Carolina offered a \$1,000 reward for aid in bringing the principals to justice; and in North Carolina Governor Ashe called an emergency meeting of his council, issued a proclamation for the arrest of Polk and Johnson, and ordered the militia out in pursuit. By this time the adventurers had long since made their escape.

As for dark purposes, Colonel William Polk was reassuring. "It is a mere land speculation," Ezekiel's Federalist nephew informed the authorities, "without any expectation at least by E.P. of seeing or experiencing danger." "I know his weak nerves too well," the nettled colonel added, "to believe he would hazard himself where there would be the most distant idea that blood would be spilt. Mr. Polk is a man charged with impatience, has no fortitude, fickle in the extreme, a lover of home, and never saw blood but from a lancet or his nose in his life; from such a leader I fear nothing."⁴²

The whole affair ended in fiasco. Cox did not appear at the appointed rendezvous when the Mecklenburgers reached East Tennessee, and some of them became discouraged and returned home. Most of the rest probably followed shortly after, when they learned that the army detachment near Knoxville, under direct orders from the secretary of war, had constructed a howitzer battery on a narrow section of the Tennessee to blow Cox's heavily armed inland ship out of the water if it tried to descend the river. Cox eventually led the remnants of his band overland to the mouth of the Cumberland and then, for unknown purposes, down the Mississippi, but it is unlikely that Ezekiel pursued the chimera farther than East Tennessee.

The collapse of the Cox adventure did not prevent Ezekiel from renewing the religious controversy on his return home, and the battle raged for some years more. Ezra Alexander's death in 1800 encouraged the orthodox, and the clergy kept up such a drumfire that in 1802 they succeeded in setting off the greatest religious revival Mecklenburg had ever experienced. At one mammoth camp meeting in the Providence section, said to have been attended by five or six

⁴² Col. William Polk to Gen. W. R. Davie, 9 Aug. 1797, photostat, McHenry Papers.

thousand people, the wave of enthusiasm swept away some of Ezekiel's staunchest supporters. The contest ended the next year when Ezekiel quit Mecklenburg for good, taking his unsettling library with him.⁴³

The Jeffersonian victory of 1800, the gradual cessation of religious controversy, and Ezekiel's departure brought relative peace to Sam Polk's cabin on Little Sugar Creek. Sam continued to prosper and to win the esteem of his neighbors. By 1799 he was a captain in the militia, and within a few years more a major and a justice of the peace. As a man of some substance, he saw to it that young Jimmy was at least taught to read and write, probably at spasmodic sessions of an "old field school." A neighbor recalled years later that "Little Jimmy Polk used to pass along this road often to school, barefooted, with his breeches rolled up to his knees. He was a mighty bashful little fellow."⁴⁴ But this placid life in the North Carolina upcountry was soon interrupted.

IX

When Ezekiel shook the dust of Mecklenburg from his heels in 1803, it was to return at last to his short-lived home in the Red River country of Middle Tennessee. This time he went at the head of a sizeable clan, for he had persuaded his married daughter and three of his married sons, all with growing families of their own, to accompany him. Ezekiel gave all of them lands adjacent to his plantation, and for the next few years the Polks settled down to the cultivation of tobacco and then cotton. Only Sam refused to leave Mecklenburg, or more probably it was Jenny who refused to leave her mother and friends for a distant country with its unknown perils and hardships.⁴⁵

⁴³ Foote, *Sketches of N.C.*, 249-250. Ezra Alexander is buried in the Polk Graveyard. When Ezekiel Polk died many years later, he left behind a library of seventy-nine volumes, including works by Gibbon and Hume and others of unspecified title. This was doubtless the deistic library that Foote says was carried to Tennessee. Hardeman County, Tenn., Wills and Inventories, Bk. 1, 14.

⁴⁴ Alexander, *History of Mecklenburg*, 50-51; Mecklenburg Court Minutes, 1796-1808, appointment of jurors, Jan. Term, 1799. "List of Justices of the Peace and Militia Officers," from the files of the governor's office (NCDAH) shows Sam Polk as first major of the second regiment of Mecklenburg militia in 1803 and justice of the peace in 1805.

⁴⁵ Ezekiel Polk was still a resident of Mecklenburg in Sept. 1803, when he made deeds disposing of his lands there. Mecklenburg Deeds, Second Series, Bk. 18, pp. 36, 39, 51, 59. The first record of Ezekiel in the Red River country is of 7 Feb. 1804. Robertson County, Tenn., Minutes of County Court, 1796-1807, p. 176. There are

Only three years elapsed, however, before a new turn in the history of the Great Speculation intensified the pull to the West. Up to this time most of the lands preempted by the Polks in the 1780's had been closed to occupation as Indian territory. Not until 1805 was the federal government, under steady pressure from Colonel William Polk and other large speculators, able to cajole the Cherokees into surrendering their claim to most of Middle Tennessee; the Chickasaw rights were extinguished by a similar treaty the next year.

Back in '83, while on the military boundary survey, Ezekiel had located for his brother Thomas a number of 5,000-acre tracts just south of the military line, in what was to become Maury County. "Such lands as you never saw," one envious settler had described the tracts, and Ezekiel had gotten several thousand acres of these valuable lands for his services as locator. Naturally he was in the vanguard of the stream of settlers that poured over the military line as soon as the Indian titles were extinguished in 1805-1806.⁴⁶ At last, thought the Polks, they had reached a promised land in which they could rest content.

Ezekiel's new home was some ten miles north of the westward-flowing Duck River in the fertile valley formed by one of its principal tributaries, Carter's Creek. Around him settled once more a goodly company of children and grandchildren. One of Ezekiel's sons had died in the Red River country the previous year, and another son had apparently refused to emigrate again. Nevertheless he had with him Matilda and her husband, John Campbell; William and his wife; Clarissa and her new husband, Thomas McNeal; and at least nine grandchildren. In addition two unmarried daughters were still under the parental roof.⁴⁷

Back in Mecklenburg the emigration fever was spreading, and Sam Polk began to weigh more seriously his father's arguments for removal to the West. With the new country opening up, there would be great opportunities for Sam as a surveyor. Besides, upcountry

numerous references to the Polk connection in the indexed typescripts of the Robertson County records in the Tennessee State Library.

⁴⁶ Elisha Williams to Joseph Williams, 2 Aug. 1807, Polk Papers (NCDAH; hereafter cited as W. H. Polk Papers); indenture between Charles Polk and William Polk, 10 Sept. 1806, Polk-Yeatman Papers; land grants, Middle District of Tennessee, File No. 91 (NCSS).

⁴⁷ Maury County, General Index to Deeds, Bargainor, Vol. 1, 199; Maury County, Minutes of County Court, Bk. 1, pp. 5, 28; Maury County, Wills and Minutes of County Court, Vol. 1, Bk. B, 7; Rogers, "Ezekiel Polk," 15-98.

North Carolina was drifting into a state of stagnation, and his boys would have a better chance to get ahead in the dynamic frontier society of Middle Tennessee. During the summer of 1806 he made up his mind, and when the crops were in, the family prepared to set out on the long, hard journey.

The Polks, if they were like other emigrants of the period, never forgot the day when they "bade adieu to their friends and relatives, the scenes of their early life, the graves of their fathers, and many objects besides around which memory loves to linger, and turned their faces to the setting sun."⁴⁸ People came from all over the county for farewells with Sam and his family, and "much tenderness of feeling" was shown; they "parted much as do those who part at the grave," for Tennessee seemed so far away that they never expected to see each other again. "Many, in taking leave, would not venture to speak; a tender embrace, a silent tear, and a pressure of the hand" were all. Only the children, excited by visions of the wonderful new world across the mountains, kept up their spirits.

Early in the morning of the appointed day, the last of the family's belongings were piled into the wagon, and the little caravan started up the road through Charlotte and on northward and then westward toward Morganton, the last village nestling at the foot of the mountains on the upper reaches of the Catawba. There was doubtless a horse or two for Sam and perhaps Jimmy to ride occasionally; four-year-old Franklin and baby Marshall, just one and a half, had to ride; and the little girls, Jane, six, and Eliza, eight, were allowed in the wagon when they tired; but for the most part the family and the slaves had to walk. Traveling in this fashion, they could not hope to cover more than twenty miles in a day, even on the best roads.

The roads, however, were rutted gullies and quagmires, softened by the autumn rains and cut to pieces by the hundreds of families who were migrating that fall. Upon reaching the single road over the mountains, the Polks found themselves in a long line of slowly moving wagons. These migrant families fell quickly and naturally into companies that traveled and camped together, for only through cooperation could they get their heavy wagons over the mountains

⁴⁸ The following account is taken from James Ross, *Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross* (Philadelphia, n.d.), 91-105, which describes the experiences of another North Carolina family migrating to Middle Tennessee in the spring of 1807. For additional comments on this journey, see Elisha Williams to Joseph Williams, 29 Nov. 1805, and Sarah Williams to Sally Williams, 29 Mar. 1807, W. H. Polk Papers.

and rivers or protect themselves from the Indians and bandits who still lurked in the desolate areas they had to traverse.

The travelers would have caught their first sight of the Blue Ridge the day before reaching Morganton. A serene blue cloud low on the horizon it appeared at first, but day by day it rose higher and became more forbidding. At length, after toiling up a narrow valley, bounded on either side by forests climbing steeply around vast, jutting masses of solid rock, the company camped at the foot of a virtually perpendicular escarpment. The next day was spent hauling the wagons one by one to the top. Here, "on these lofty heights the emigrant might take his stand," as one of these migrating North Carolinians later recalled, "and turning his face to the east, gaze for the last time on his native State and bid it a final adieu. First and last, how many sorrowful hearts, young and old, have performed this sad rite!"

There was little time for such musing, however, since the most grueling part of the journey had only begun. From here the road crawled across a rugged plateau and along torrential streams that cut a tortuous path through mountain barriers more formidable than the Blue Ridge, before descending into the valleys of East Tennessee. Cabins and fields began to reappear as the valleys broadened, and the company quickened its pace as it neared Knoxville, the center of Tennessee's social, political, and economic life. In the state capital's hospitable tavern Sam and his family were able to enjoy briefly the comforts they had left behind.

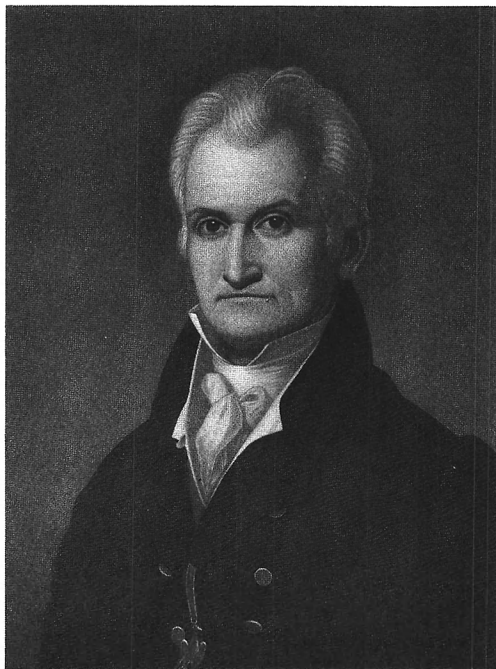
All too soon they were on the road again, their ears filled with warnings of a "howling wilderness" forty miles ahead. There were still more than 200 miles to go, and over half this distance lay across the Cumberland Mountain, a barren plateau that isolated the infant communities in Middle Tennessee from the longer-settled eastern section of the state. Forewarned, the Polks loaded their wagon with enough food to last several weeks before venturing into this inhospitable country. Only ten years earlier Indian hostility had made it unsafe to cross the Cumberland plateau without a military guard; and though large-scale attacks no longer occurred, one could never feel secure from wandering Indian bands or white outlaw gangs. Indeed the travelers had reason to be apprehensive of the occasional self-styled "good Injun" who appeared along the road to sell venison, since one could never be sure that he was not reconnoitering for a nearby hostile band.

OLD MECKLENBURG

With a mixture of relief and anticipation the Polks' company plunged down the final steep descent and found themselves at last among the verdant, gently rolling hills of Middle Tennessee. Shortly after reaching the wide Caney Fork, the Polks turned off the main Nashville road to the south, and within another three or four days they were approaching Ezekiel's settlement on Carter's Creek. When the little caravan finally pulled up at Ezekiel's cabin, the joy of reunion was hardly greater for these weary travelers than their happiness at the prospect of warm fires and soft beds. And small wonder; in something like a month and a half they had walked nearly 500 miles across the roughest terrain in eastern North America.



Jane Knox Polk

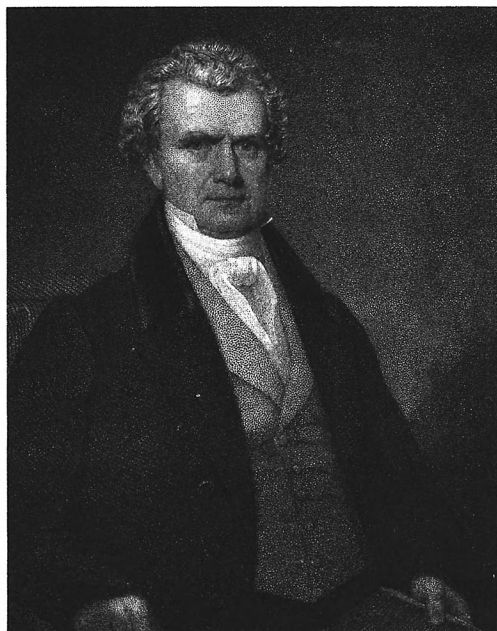


Colonel William Polk

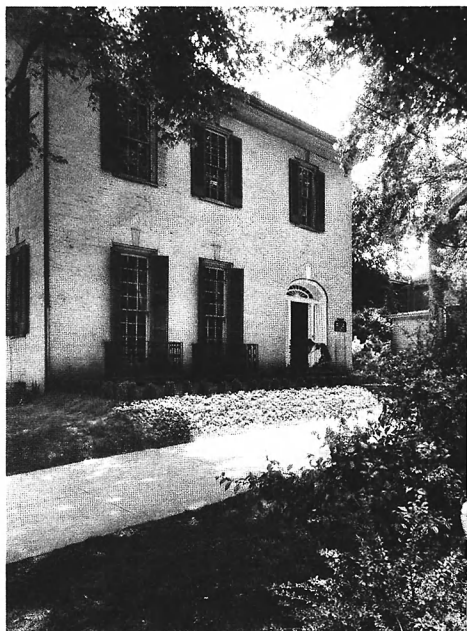


The University of North Carolina

. . . YOUTH



Felix Grundy

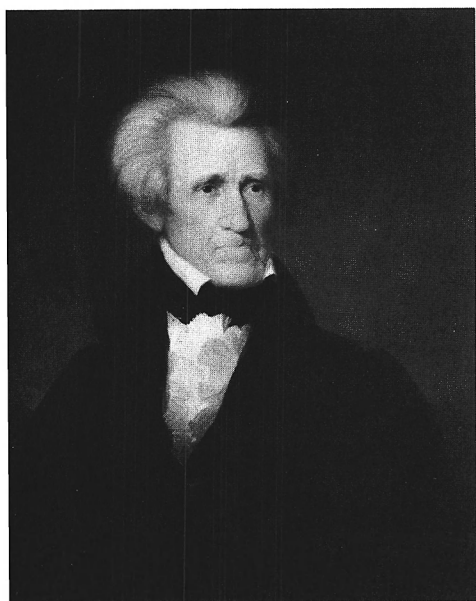


Sam Polk House

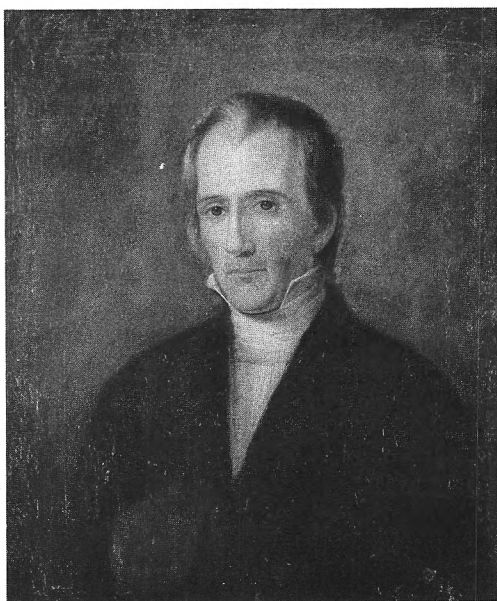


Polk's Law Office

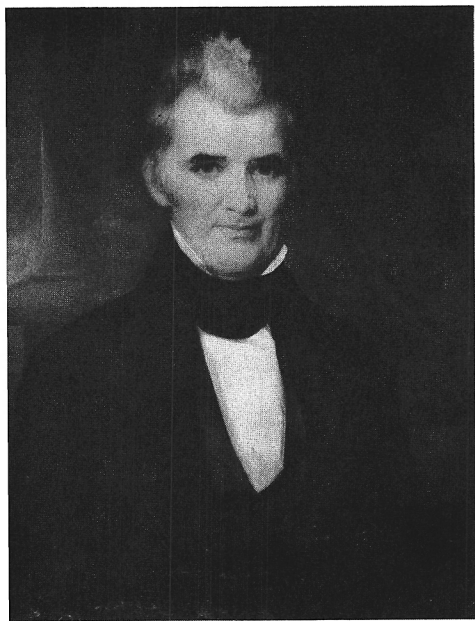
. . . BEGINNINGS



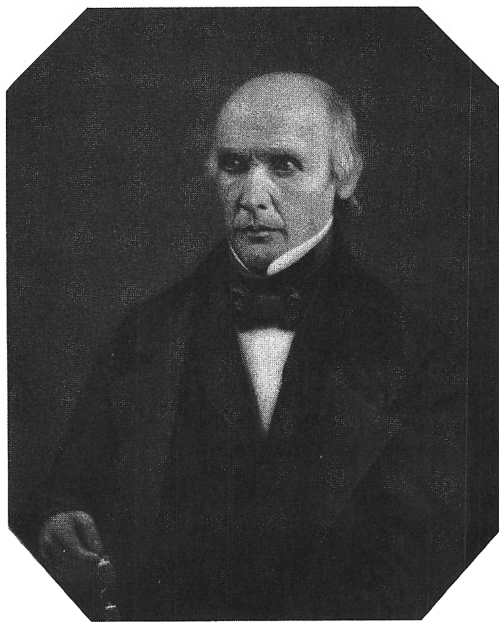
Andrew Jackson



Hugh Lawson White



William Carroll



Cave Johnson

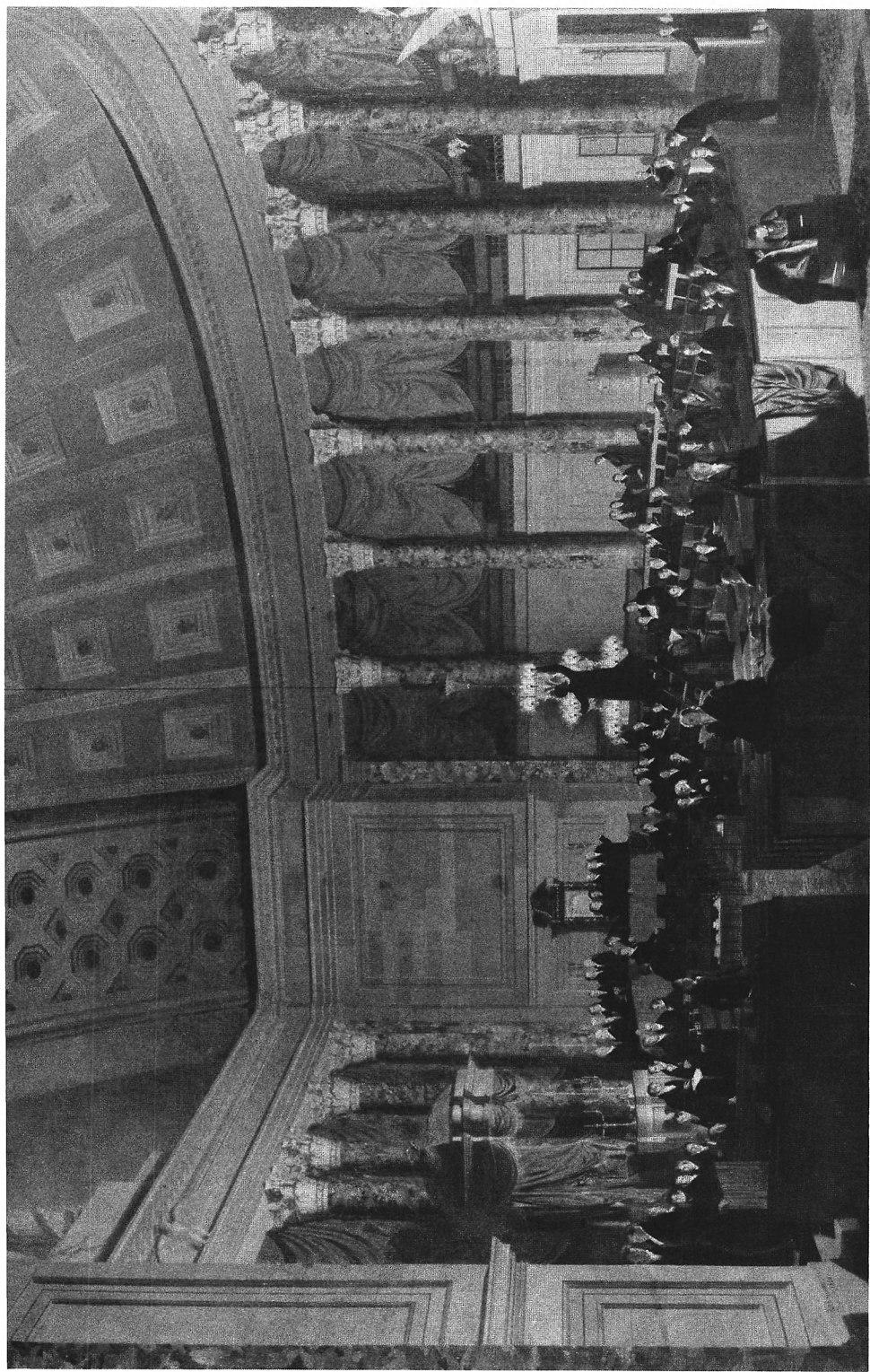
. . . TRUE REPUBLICANS



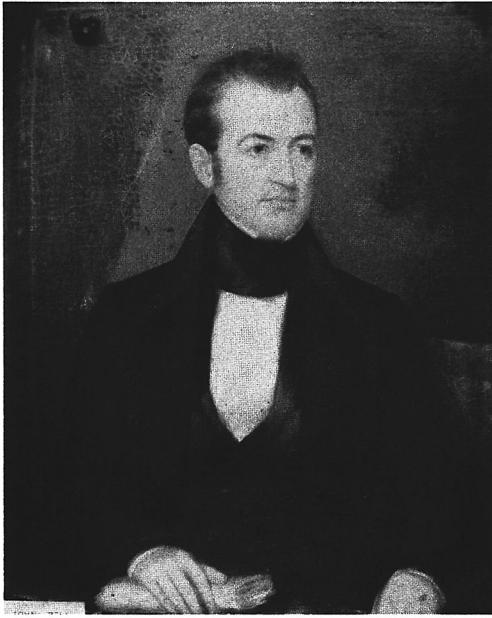
Sarah Childress Polk



James Knox Polk



The Old House of Representatives

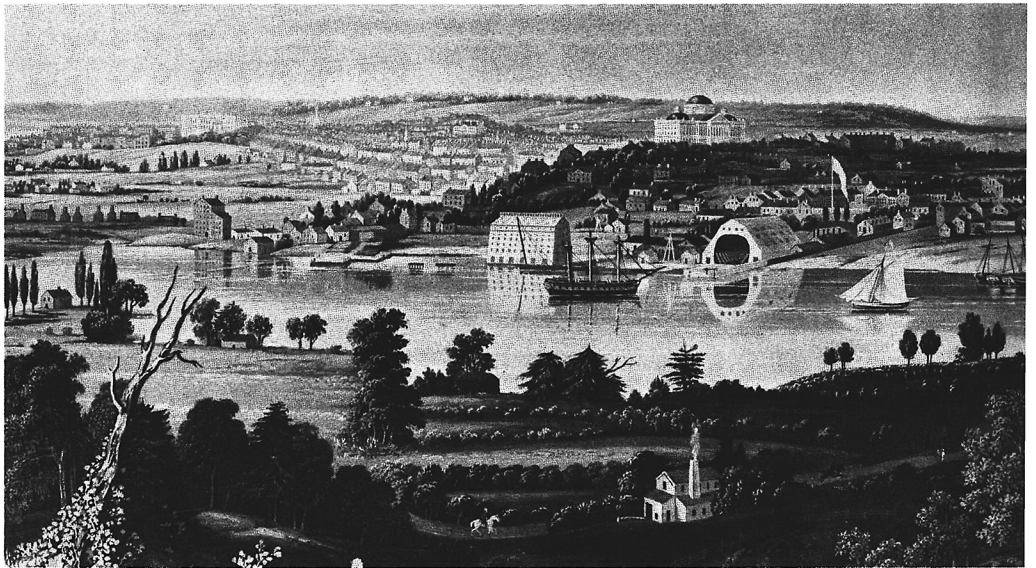


John Bell

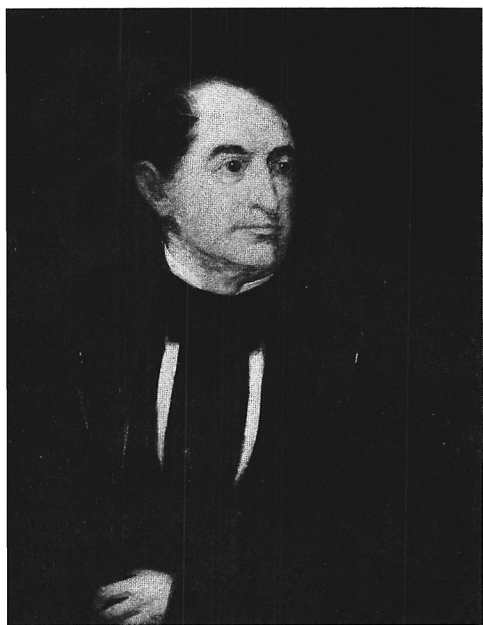


Richard M. Johnson

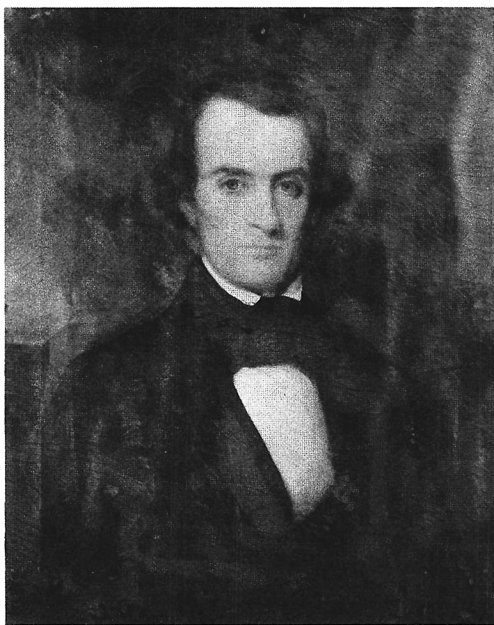
POLK'S RIVALS FOR NATIONAL PROMINENCE



The City of Washington, 1833

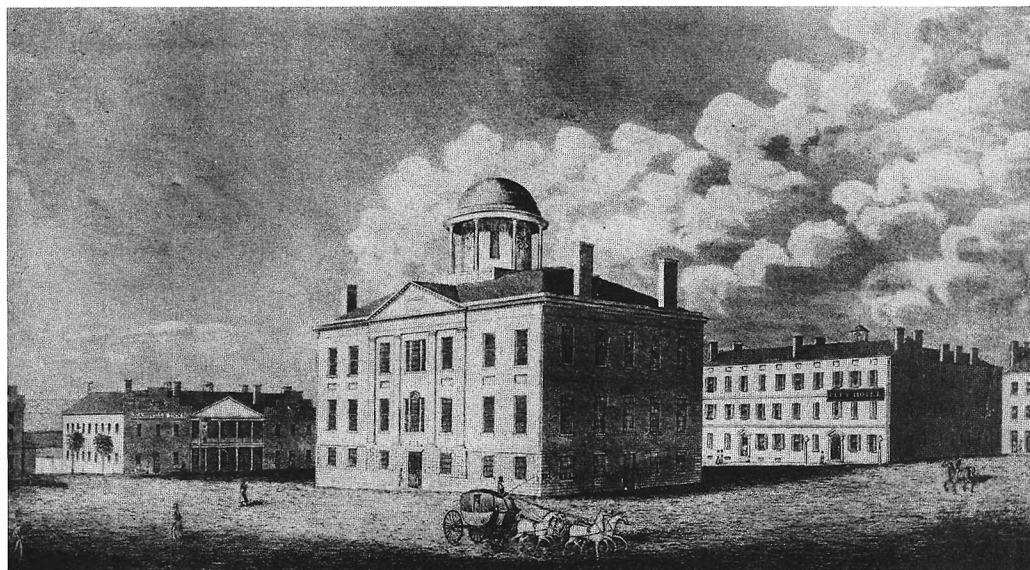


Ephraim H. Foster

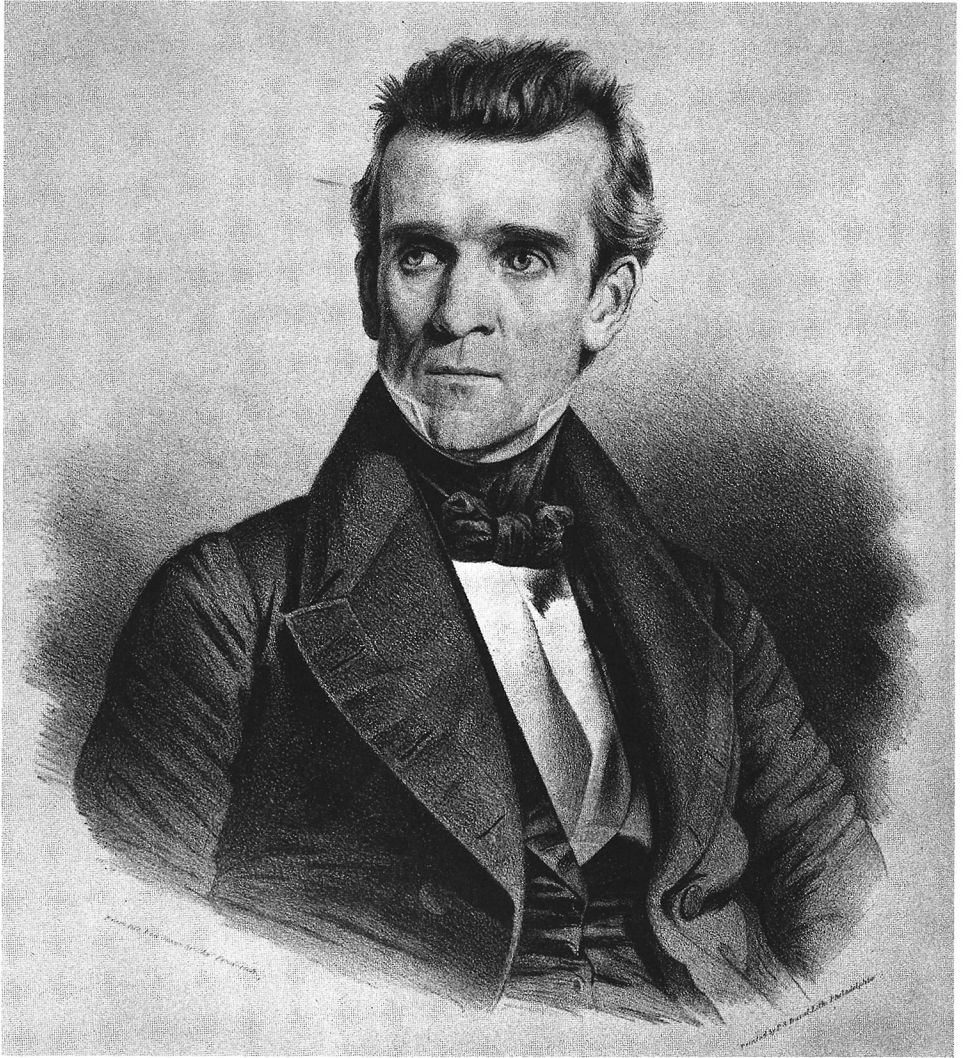


James C. Jones

. . . RIVALS FOR CONTROL OF TENNESSEE



The Courthouse at Nashville, Meeting Place of the Tennessee Legislature



Polk as Governor

“ . . . Henceforth His Career Will Be Downwards ” ?