

Justice Robert Turnbull

The Trimbles The Family and The County

<http://www.ole.net/~maggie/trimble/trimfam.htm>



Judge Robert Trimble, in whose honor Trimble County was named, was a descendant of this old Irish family born in Berkeley county, Virginia, of a simple but most respectable farming people. The schools in the back-woods districts, to which his father had come across the mountains into Kentucky when Robert Trimble was but a small child, were so poor that the little fellow had a hard time securing an education. But he borrowed good books from cultivated families in the vicinity and improved himself rapidly, as he was a most diligent student. In his youth he aspired to the practice of law and began his studies under George Nicholas, whose chief distinction in the new State of Kentucky was thwarting this emancipation movement in the first constitutional convention, where Father David Rice immortalized himself as a patriot and lover of human freedom in opposition to George Nicholas.

Robert Trimble continued his studies under another attorney at the death of George Nicholas, and was licensed to practice by the Court of Appeals in 1863(probably should be 1803). He hung out his shingles in Paris, Kentucky, that same year and was elected to the Legislature from Bourbon County. This experience was the heated atmosphere and arena of political intrigue and contest proved disastrous in his sensitive and honorable nature that he several times declined nominations even to the Senate of the United States. He stuck to the practice of law and to the literature and duties of his profession, preparing himself for the most impartial and dignified career of a jurist. In 1808 he was advanced to the court of Appeals and there distinguished himself. In 1810 he was offered the appointment as Chief Justice of the State; but owing to his limited fortune he returned to the private practice of his profession. He filed successively the office of District Attorney and that of Federal Judge. In 1826 President John Quincy Adams appointed him to the Supreme Court at Washington. His ability and high sense of honor and justice occasioned immediate recognition from Chief Justice Marshall and his colleagues of the court. he died in Washington in 1828 in the fifty second year of his age, widely mourned and lamented. Trimble county was named in his honor eight years later.

Perhaps the most notable incident in the life of Judge Robert Trimble was his support of the so called Anti-Relief Party and measures in the fierce contest between the creditor and debtor classes in this State one hundred years ago. The great world against Napoleon had ended with a wide collapse of the industrial and financial fabric in England, France and

Italy had brought the masses of the people over there to the verge of starvation in 1816-17. In this country, as usual speculation had reached a feverish extreme. Western land, new canals and turnpikes and other internal improvements had excited the hope and cupidity of the people to such an extent that the crash of 1819 shook the country to its foundations. The new doctrine of protection, that had appeared under the embargo of the War of 1812, fostered stock companies, corporations, and other mushroom enterprises along with the infant industries of the nation. In Kentucky the Old State Bank had existed since 1807. People imagined that more lands and more paper money would assist mightily in solving the desperate problem of creditor and debtor. Anticipating the collapse of the speculation craze, the Kentucky Legislature in 1818 chartered forty-six independent banks. The suspension of specie payment soon followed. In 1820 the independent banks were abolished by the State and the Bank of the Commonwealth was established at Frankfort with a branch in each judicial district. A paper dollar was worth but fifty cents in specie. The distress of the debtor class beggars description. The biographer of Judge Ben Hardin says that in the vicinity of Louisville the finest farms had been taken over by the banks and could buy land only on terms made to the security of the creditor class.

The cry of the Relief Party, which represented the great majority of the people who were in poor circumstances or heavily in debt, so moved the Legislature that laws were passed postponing the inevitable day of doom to the debtor. It was in this excited and impassioned conflict that imprisonment for debt was abolished in the State of Kentucky. General John Adair, an old Revolutionary Hero, was Governor and approved of the law passed to protect the impoverished masses whose ballots gave them overwhelming majorities in the House and Senate in Frankfort. The Anti-Relief Party, which included the merchants most of the lawyers and jurists, and the more prosperous farmers, fought the Relief Party even the Free Silver Campaign and the Goebel controversy of seventy-five years later were minor political episodes. Oldham county was born in the heat and excitement of this famous social conflict.