



## Cave Johnson

Cave Johnson was the most accomplished politician of antebellum Clarksville and Montgomery County. He was born just east of Springfield, Tennessee, on January 11, 1793. He was educated in Sumner County and Nashville, and began the study of law in 1812. In the fall of 1813, as a Lieutenant, he accompanied his father, Brigadier General William Johnson, on the expedition led by Major General Andrew Jackson against the Creek Indians.

Without seeing much action, Cave returned home and was mustered out of service on May 10, 1814. He then resumed the study of law with P. W. Humphreys near Yellow Creek in Montgomery County. While staying nearby in the home of Mr. Robert West, he met and fell for Elizabeth Dortch, the sister of Mrs. West. Cave was 22 years old at the time and Elizabeth was 15. She “very properly rejected” him, and he was mortified. As a result of that episode, Cave was determined “never to address another lady.”

He passed the bar and began practicing law in Springfield. In 1817, without any application or knowledge of the vacancy, Cave was elected Attorney General by the Tennessee Legislature sitting in Knoxville. In 1820 he moved to Clarksville, and his prospects brightened. His practice improved, and by 1828, he estimated his fortune at “forty or fifty thousand dollars.” Politically, Johnson was a “Jacksonian Democrat” in part because of his father’s friendship with Andrew Jackson. Cave ran for the United States Congress in 1828, and was elected Representative of the 8th District. Soon after his arrival in Washington, Cave, tall and handsome at 35, became the “escort” of Rose O’Neale, a teenage beauty who was the niece of the boardinghouse owner where Cave resided. Rose O’Neale Greenhow was later to become a “celebrated” Confederate spy; captured, jailed and exiled to the South by President Lincoln in 1861.

Cave was re-elected to Congress in 1831, and again in 1833, even after having voted against President Jackson’s “force bill” that was to counter South Carolina’s “nullification” act of 1832, that sought to resist Federal efforts to collect tariffs by force within state boundaries. Though no legislation from the Congress bears his name, Cave was an ardent fiscal conservative, always looking for economy in government. He was best at party politics, working behind the scenes. He was reelected in 1835, but in 1837 was narrowly defeated by General Richard Cheatham, partly due to the public’s dissatisfaction with the Democrats and the recession of 1837.

Undaunted, he returned home and renewed his suit for Elizabeth Dortch, who was at that time a widow named Elizabeth Dortch Brunson with one son and two daughters. Cave and Elizabeth were married on February 20, 1838. Over the years, the couple had three sons of their own, all born at the family residence, 916 Madison Street.

In 1839, 1841, and 1843, Cave was re-elected to Congress. He and others campaigned for James K. Polk, another Tennessee friend from the Congress, and helped get him elected President. As a reward, in 1845, Polk made Cave Johnson the 12th United States Postmaster General. During his four years on the job, Johnson oversaw the issue of the first adhesive postage stamp of the United States, and urban mail pickup service. After leaving office in 1849, Cave tended Elizabeth, who had contracted breast cancer. She died on November 10, 1851.

Cave served as President of the Bank of Tennessee from 1854 into 1860, and later that year his friend President James Buchanan appointed him a United States Commissioner to settle a dispute between an American company, the Paraguay Navigation Company, and the Republic of Paraguay. Cave rendered the correct decision against the American company, borne out by the facts, however, other pressures prevented the suit from being settled.

In declining health, Johnson spent most of his last years in the home of his stepdaughter, Mrs. Mary E. Forbes, wife of Colonel William A. Forbes, killed in Virginia during the battle of Second Bull Run. Cave spent some time at his farm on Blooming Grove Creek, and was present at the surrender of Clarksville to Commodore Foote on February 19, 1862, where Cave prevailed upon Foote to issue a proclamation guaranteeing the civil rights and safety of the citizens of Clarksville during occupation. He spent the war years as a bystander, a reluctant Confederate. In 1865, he was unanimously elected to fill the unexpired term of State Senator H. R. Pearle, but was denied his seat because he had “consented to” and “countenanced” the rebellion, among other charges.

He died at the residence of Mrs. Forbes, 206 North 2nd Street, Clarksville, on November 23, 1866, and lies buried beside his wife in Greenwood Cemetery, having been re-interred there from Trinity Cemetery, once located near the corner of Franklin and 10th Streets.