

THE MINORITY GOVERNOR

Good day everyone...it's a beautiful day in Pennsylvania.

Joseph Ritner was the only minority party governor in Pennsylvania political history, and he was probably the poorest man ever to run for the office. At the same time, when he died, he was the oldest governor in Pennsylvania history--almost 90. Ritner was a member of the Anti-Mason party--a real oddity in Pennsylvania history. He was, beyond that the least formally educated governor in state history, with about a half-year's formal education. Yes, any boy can become Governor! He was a portly, muscular farm hand, the first American political figure, by the way, ever to have a campaign picture made of himself standing by a plow at the end of a long and shallow furrow. He entered politics as a supervisor of county roads. Then he became a member of the House and was twice elected Speaker of the House. Between 1827 and 1840, the Democrat-Anti-Mason Party was a political organization of consequence in Pennsylvania; an extremism stand against fraternal organizations, particularly the Masons, but moreover, was an abolitionist party. Ritner was the Anti-Mason Party's only gubernatorial candidate. He lost twice for the Governorship, and then defeated the educator Governor Wolf in 1835, because, luckily, the Democrats had split into two parties. Because he had settled into Washington County in the west, he was the first Governor elected from Western Pennsylvania. He had a turbulent three years in office. The panic of 1837 hit him, as did Thaddeus Steven's legislative

leadership against secretive societies. The state was in deep debt, because of the canal-building, and Ritner was stuck with all of it. But he courageously fought for further state expenditures for education, and during his tenure, the Pennsylvania Geological Survey, the first of its kind in the nation was established. In 1838, the new Pennsylvania Constitution was adopted during the Ritner Administration, which in the main, reduced the powers of the Governorship. Ritner was an abolitionist, but that constitution, much to his dismay, disenfranchised the Negro. Because he was known for his great anti-slavery stand, even the poet John Greenleaf Whittier wrote about him "one spirit untrammelled...on the banks of Swatara, the songs of the Rhine", the only Pennsylvania Governor ever heralded by a famous poet. Ritner was a good man, but his minority party never contributed too much. He was appointed to Federal posts after he was governor, never again holding political office. And he was a delegate to the first Republican Nation Convention. At 81 years of age, he attended the dedication of Edinboro State College in the northwest. He died just after the Civil War, cursing its happening, even as people sound out against wars today. Joseph Ritner, poor, hapless, but a dedicated Governor to the people of Pennsylvania.

This is Pete Wambach. It's a beautiful day in Pennsylvania.