



## *Walker (Robert Walker), 1847*

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Robert J. Walker was nominated by President James K. Polk to be the 18th Secretary of the Treasury. He served from March 8, 1845 until March 5, 1849.

Walker, despite being a man of small stature, "stooping and diminutive, with a wheezy voice and expressionless face," sustained a multitude of activities during his lifetime, including display of remarkable leadership and vote-gathering abilities. In 1824, as a leader of the Democratic Party in Pennsylvania, he became a force in rallying party strength behind the Presidential ambitions of Andrew Jackson. Moving to Mississippi to join his brother, Duncan, in a lucrative law practice, Walker became an impressive speculator in cotton, plantation, and slaves.

He was elected to the United States Senate in 1835, claiming Jackson's support, and while serving as Senator advocated sectional interests. He favored the award of public lands to new states; endorsed a low tariff; opposed distribution of the Federal surplus funds for fear of creating an excuse to raise tariff rates; and, significantly, supported the independent Treasury system idea. He also opposed the Bank of the United States. Walker enthusiastically endorsed the annexation of Texas, which led to his entry into the Polk Cabinet in 1845. Despite Walker's and others strong support for Texas annexation, President Tyler's treaty of annexation was defeated in the Senate. A compromise resolution for annexation was, however, passed during the Polk Administration.

For his support in expansion policy and his assistance during the election of 1844, President Polk brought Walker into the Cabinet as Secretary of the Treasury, where he served four admirable years. As Secretary, Walker supported the independent Treasury system, pushed for a tariff for revenue, negotiated a public loan for support of the Mexican War, and established a warehousing system for handling imports that has had lasting influence. In addition, it was Walker who sponsored the bill for the creation of the Department of the Interior.

After leaving Treasury in 1849, Walker devoted himself to business and land speculation, as well as mining interests. Following a very brief term in 1857 as Governor of strife-torn Kansas Territory, he resigned due to Southern extremists, and became a Unionist and very active supporter of the Federal war effort during the Civil War.

Robert J. Walker was born on July 19, 1804, in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, the son of Judge Jonathan Hoge Walker. He graduated at the top of his class at the University of Pennsylvania in 1819, and was admitted to the bar in Pittsburgh, in 1821. Robert J. Walker died November 11, 1869 in Washington, D.C.

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CLASS: *Legare*-Class Iron Steamer

BUILDER: Joseph Thomlinson, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

DATES OF SERVICE: 1847-1848

DISPOSITION: To Coast Survey in 1847

DISPLACEMENT: 400 tons

LENGTH: 160 feet

BEAM: 24 feet

DRAFT: 9 feet, 3 inches to 9 feet, 9 inches

PROPULSION: Side Wheel

MACHINERY: ?

COMPLEMENT: 58 (*Legare*)

ARMAMENT: Three 32-pounders

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### **Cutter History:**

In the 1830s and 1840s the sea services were searching for an alternative to the cumbersome and highly exposed side paddle wheels. John Ericsson and Richard Loper had patented screw propellers, and Navy Lieutenant William Hunter proposed horizontally mounted paddle wheels, which rotated merry-go-round style within the hull, below the waterline. Apertures in the hull sides allowed the paddles to act on the surrounding waters. Hunter had succeeded in interesting the Navy in his idea, and the Revenue Service followed suit. In all, eight steamers were begun for the Revenue Service, four with Hunter's system (*Bibb*, *Dallas*, *McLane*, and *Spencer*), two with Ericsson's (*Jefferson*, *Legare*), and two paddle-wheel vessels (*Polk*, *Walker*). All eight were also built of iron – a

very early use of that metal. Steam vessels were thought to be of particular use in the narrow waterways of the southern coasts, in pursuit of smugglers.

All eight vessels provided unmitigated failures. Lieutenant Hunter had not taken into full account the waste of power when the paddles encountered and worked against water entering the paddle-wheel casings. In addition, the vessels were coal hungry (the Navy's three Hunter's wheel vessels had the same problem).

The machinery of Ericsson's vessels proved overly complicated, and the side-wheel ships suffered from delays, lack of iron, faulty plans, and bad weather. Originally slated to cost \$50,000 each, over \$2 million was eventually spent in original construction and the massive modifications required subsequently in attempts to rectify the problems.

The eight vessels had extremely short service lives. Only the Coast Survey seemed to profit from the debacle, receiving five of the ships when they were cast off by the Revenue Service. Two became lightships and one was converted into a barque.

The 400-ton, side-wheel vessel *Walker* was launched in November 1847 and was ordered to New Orleans from Pittsburgh on 14 December 1847. She transferred to the U. S. Coast Survey early in January 1848 after arriving at New Orleans. She sank off Absecon, New Jersey on 21 June 1860.

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### **Sources:**

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