

HOW A KENT COUNTY SENATOR SAVED ANDREW JOHNSON'S PRESIDENCY

by Gene Johnstone

IT WAS A COLD WINTER MORNING AROUND 3 A.M. ON MARCH 6, 1868, WHEN A knock at the door awakened General George Vickers at his home in Chestertown. The sleepy resident asked from a second story window as to who was there? The response was, "We are a committee of the Maryland Legislature, sent here for the purpose of notifying you of your election as United States Senator, and to request your immediate attendance at Washington."

What a surprise for the new Senator! He hastily dressed himself and admitted the Committee. After a prayer of both Protestants and Catholics, Vickers accompanied the Committee on its immediate return to Baltimore on an ice boat, breaking the frozen water in the Chesapeake Bay as they went. In Baltimore, Vickers was placed on a special Baltimore and Ohio train that took him to Washington just in time to be sworn in. When Vickers presented his credentials, Senator Sumner of Massachusetts made an unsuccessful attempt to have Vickers' admittance held up by the Judiciary Committee. After this ineffective effort, General George Vickers was sworn in and he took his seat in the United States Senate.

On May 16, 1868, the test vote on President Andrew Johnson's guilt as charged in the Impeachment Articles was taken. A two-thirds vote—36—was required to convict. Thirty-five Senators were for conviction and nineteen for acquittal. A change of just one vote would have carried conviction. The vote was taken alphabetically. The atmosphere was at fever heat as the names were called. The 'Vs' were naturally at the end of the roll call, and the battle was to turn on Vickers' vote. It came without hesitation or apology: "Not guilty."

The result of acquittal was entered. This vote is now considered just and fortunate by temperate historians.

And so, through the vote of Senator George Vickers, a Marylander from Kent County—who declared he would not vote guilty because it was a national disgrace and calamity to impeach the president—the course of American history was determined.

The names appearing on the Senate trial document of President Andrew Johnson, one hundred and thirty-one years ago, made history. And among the greatest of them was Senator George Vickers of Maryland, a Kent County native who loved both his family and his country.

Information for this article was taken from a scrapbook compiled by Jane Vickers Brooks Sprinkle (Mrs. John H.). Jane is a great granddaughter of George Vickers and is an active member of the Historical Society of Kent County.

If You Don't Ask, You'll Never Receive ...

Consider being a donor to Geddes-Piper House of:

- a large wooden library table, or a pair of such, equaling 10 to 12 feet in length for the Board and library use

or ... appropriate to the period of the house, but not necessarily old:

- silver trays, 24" x 15" approximately
- rugs and/or runners any size needed to protect new finish on old pine floors
- blue and white decorative porcelain
- appropriate artifacts from earlier times suitable for display on shelves or mantels
- ironstone ware, preferably white, for display in our colonial (basement) kitchen
- tall brass candlesticks

GENERAL GEORGE VICKERS

GEORGE VICKERS WAS BORN IN Chestertown on November 19, 1801. His parents were Captain James Vickers of Chestertown and Ann Davis Vickers of Queen Anne's County. George married Mary Mansfield of Chestertown on January 5, 1826.

After graduation from Washington College, he worked in the county clerk's office preparing himself for the profession of law. He was admitted to the bar in 1832 and began his practice in Kent County. In 1836 he was one of twenty-one Whig members of the Senatorial College of Maryland. In 1864 he was a presidential elector and was elected a member of the Maryland Senate in 1865. Governor Hicks appointed Vickers a Major General of the Maryland Militia in 1861, and he was elected a United States Senator in 1868.

George and Ann had nine children, six of whom lived to adulthood. Senator George Vickers died on October 8, 1879 at the age of seventy-eight.



George Vickers' house stood on High Street where the 1903 Elementary School was erected. Vickers' home was the grandest of Kent County's Italianate houses. It had a four-square plan plus a small service wing and was surmounted by a belvedere. This location is now the site of Kent's County Administrative Offices in the rehabilitated 1903 Elementary School. The area has been designated "Vickers' Park" by the Chestertown Beautification Committee. Sketch from Martenet's Map of Kent County, 1860.