ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO THIS spring, America mourned the death of William Rufus DeVane King, Alabama's only United States vice president. Fellow statesmen paused from political differences to render eloquent eulogies praising King's long career as a senator and diplomat. As orations echoed in the capital city, periodical and newspaper editors in the North and the South lauded his personal qualities in black-banded tributes and published likenesses of the vice president's once handsome face. Alabamians grieved, and much of the nation joined them. A country caught in trying times had lost a great Unionist, a respected statesman of four decades, and the only United States executive official to take the oath of office on foreign soil.

Front cover: *William R. King, by an unidentified artist, ca. 1840. Oil on canvas, 30 by 26 inches. A King family provenance, which reveals this portrait to be an accurate and preferred likeness, tells of damage incurred when Union troops plundered Chestnut Hill after the Battle of Selma. During a later restoration in 1989, a conservator noted that the image had received substantial repair for a large number of bullet holes. The portrait was inherited by King's sister, Tabitha King Kornegay, and descended to her granddaughter, Elizabeth Hogan Williams, who gave it to the Selma Library in 1904. (Selma-Dallas County Public Library, Selma.)* ***Opposite page:*** *William R. King, by George Cooke, 1839. Oil on canvas, 36 by 29 1/4 inches. (Philanthropic Society, Phi Hall, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.)*

THE FACES OF WILLIAM RUFUS KING

HANDSOME, ERUDITE, AND AMBITIOUS, HE CLIMBED TO THE HIGHEST POLITICAL OFFICE EVER ATTAINED BY AN ALABAMIAN. UNFORTUNATELY, IT WAS AN OFFICE HE WOULD NOT HOLD.

By DANIEL FATE BROOKS

King's death cut short his political service, but his life chronicle remains as rich and colorful as the numerous portraits of him. He was a complex man of strong loyalties, extraordinary determination and duty, exemplary honor, polished manners, and personal difference. For many Alabamians, he epitomized the state's finest image of itself during the early antebellum period. William Rufus King personified leadership. A patrician and a statesman—experienced, educated and traveled—he carved a planter's civilization out of a newly tamed wilderness.

King, the second son of William and Margaret DeVane King, was born April 7, 1786, on his family's plantation in Sampson County, North Carolina. He attended private academies in nearby Kenansville and enrolled in the University of North Carolina, where he became a member of the Philanthropic Society, a distinguished campus literary club. By the end of his junior year in 1804, he developed an interest in law and left Chapel Hill to study with William Duffy, a prominent attorney in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Under Duffy's watchful eye, King was carefully groomed for the world of law and politics.

By 1808, King had successfully launched his career, opening a law office in Clinton, the county seat of his native Sampson County, and winning a seat in the North Carolina House of Commons. He was elected to the 12th, 13th, and 14th Congresses and became an ardent supporter of President James Madison's administration, aligning himself with John C. Calhoun and Henry Clay and the cause of the young War Hawks. Endorsing the War of 1812, he firmly supported the use of tariffs to promote American manufacturing and other nationalistic programs.

Although King might not rank in brilliance with some of his contemporaries, more experienced statesmen recognized his abilities. In 1816, at age thirty, he became Secretary of Legation to William Pinckney of Maryland,

THERE, IN THE RICH BLACK BELT, HE AMASSED VAST ACREAGE, BUILT HIS HOME "CHESTNUT HILL," AND HELPED EXPAND A RIVER COMMUNITY THAT HE NAMED SELMA FOR A CITY IN OSSIAN'S POEM, *THE SONGS OF SELMA*.

Above: *Residence of the late Vice President King—His Death Place, wood engraving,* Illustrated News, *New York, April 30, 1853. King's home, Chestnut Hill, was located east of the Alabama River in Dallas County, five and a half miles from Cahaba. Constructed ca. 1820, on a knoll surrounded by chestnut trees, it was reported to be "one of the first white houses" in the area. The house was inherited by King's sister, Tabitha King Kornegay, and burned in the 1920s. (Author's collection.)* ***Opposite page:*** *William R. King, by an unidentified artist, ca. 1835. Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 by 25 1/2 inches. According to family sources, this portrait was inherited by King's niece Catherine Ellis, who was a frequent guest at the White House during the Buchanan administration. Mrs. Ellis moved to Camden during the Civil War to keep house and care for the orphaned children of her cousin, Col. Franklin King Beck, CSA. The portrait was inherited by Beck descendants and given to the City of Selma. (Vaughn-Smitherman Museum, Selma.)*

the newly appointed minister to the Two Sicilies and the Court of Russia. He welcomed the opportunity, making note in his journal:

Actuated by a desire to visit the continent of Europe, which I had fostered from a very early period of my life, but which my various avocations had hitherto prevented me from carrying into execution, I determined to resign my situation and request the appointment of Secretary of Legation rightfully conceiving, that I should therefore enjoy greater facilities for acquiring that kind of information, which constituted my chief object. My wish, when made known, was promptly met by the government and I received the President's commission bearing the date, the 23rd, April, 1816.

During his tenure, first in Naples and later in St. Petersburg, the young diplomat observed social cus-

toms and recorded vivid descriptions of his travels, which he noted "rendered scenes worthy of the pencil of a painter." No doubt the opportunity satisfied his personal ambitions for social observation and at the same time provided him with valuable diplomatic experience.

Completing his service in Russia, King traveled on the continent before returning to North Carolina in the fall of 1817. During his absence, "Alabama Fever" struck the seaboard states. His older brother, Thomas DeVane King, who had located on the banks of the Black Warrior River in what would become Tuscaloosa County, wrote of fertile lands in the new territory. William Rufus King took heed and, by early 1818, moved to a large bend on the Alabama River in Dallas County. There, in the rich Black Belt, he amassed vast acreage, built his home, "Chestnut Hill," and helped expand a river community that he named Selma for a city in Ossian's poem, *The Songs of Selma*.

Alabama settlers recognized King as an established leader. The handsome young man's achievements commanded their respect and confidence. He was selected to help prepare the state constitution and elected one of Alabama's first United States senators. In 1819, twenty-eight-year-old John Campbell, secretary of the constitutional convention, described the new senator from south Alabama: "He is about thirty three years of age, a very gay, elegant looking fellow—a fluent speaker and a man of respectable talents."

By his third election as senator in 1834, the well-known moderate from Alabama had earned recognition as a leader in the causes of land legislation, tariff reform, and banking. King, a Democrat, was in most cases a strong supporter of Andrew Jackson and fought to preserve the Union.

King's talent and experience, coupled with an imposing appearance, fostered confidence and popularity with admirers who respectfully addressed him as "Colonel King." For many King was the "beau ideal of manhood." One observer described him as "about six feet, remarkably erect in figure, well proportioned and impressive even to strangers." His political and personal accomplishments were hailed in both North Carolina and Alabama, and citizens of both states claimed him as their own. In 1822, King, who had attended the University of North Carolina between 1801 and 1804, was invited by the members of the Philanthropic Society to sit for a portrait for their chambers. Recognizing him as a former member of "considerable eminence," the society discussed the matter and then made a motion requesting a portrait of the Alabama senator. According to the "Phi" minutes, the movement produced no immediate results, but the members continued their efforts. On March 2, 1838, they approved a plan to "take down the ellipses" over the

LISTED AS PUBLISHED IN WASHINGTON CITY AND TITLED WITH THE FACSIMILE SIGNATURE, THE FENDERICH LITHOGRAPH OF KING PORTRAYS A STRIKING SUBJECT MORE YOUTHFUL THAN HIS EXCESS OF FIFTY YEARS.

fireplaces in their third floor chamber of South Hall and replace one of them with the likeness of King, whom they deemed one "of our most distinguished members."

A committee, established to decorate the quarters, as well as document King's relationship with the society, was authorized to contact him requesting permission. On April 4, 1838, King, writing from Washington D.C., responded:

Gentlemen:

The estimation in which I am held by the members of the Philanthropic Society, as evidenced by their request, will ever be a source of pride and gratification. To sustain the honor and advance the property of that Institution, constituted at one period of my life, the strongest feeling of my nature; it entwined itself around every fiber of my heart, and has stimulated all my energies.

I comply with great pleasure with the request of the Society, shall sit for the best artist here; and soon as the painting is finished transmit it by the most secure conveyance which can be obtained.

With the highest respect, I am Gentlemen,
Your obedient servant,
William R. King

King immediately commissioned artist George Cooke (1793-1849), a native of Maryland, who worked in Washington at various times between 1812 and 1848. In 1837, Cooke's artistic endeavors included interior and exterior scenes, and portraits of statesmen. He also painted several visiting Native Americans, works that were published in 1838 as chromolithographs in Thomas McKenney and James Hall's *The Indian Tribes of North America with Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes of the Principal Chiefs.*

Cooke's portrait of King, begun in 1838, depicts the senator, by this time fifty-two years old, as a Byronic beauty of much younger age. No record survives of the arrangement between the subject and artist, but one questions if Cooke's artistic license came at King's request. In the portrait King is shown holding a letter addressed "Hon. Wm. R. King, Alabama." A draped background and the marble base of a Roman column enhance the distinguished and governmental image.

Not everyone hailed King with accolades. His life in the 1830s was also marked by criticism and insults. Some time in the early part of the decade, "an affair of honor" occurred between King and Major Michael Kenan, a Dallas County planter. According to one account, Kenan verbally attacked King on the street in Cahaba. Though history has not recorded exactly what Kenan said, it was sufficiently insulting to provoke the senator to draw a dagger from his cane and pass it across Kenan's chest. King refused to accept Kenan's subsequent challenge because of the character of the insult. It appears that Kenan then solicited the help of a neighbor, John Perry, to act as second and deliver a challenge to King. When King refused, Perry then challenged the senator himself, and the men set a meeting place out of state. After some thought, Perry, who was totally unaware of the content of Kenan's challenge, declined to attend, deeming the matter too frivolous to engage in "deadly combat" with a friend with whom he had no conflict.

The frivolous nature of the impending duel leads modern researchers to speculate that the conflict in question was tainted with the same gossip that was circulating in Washington. In 1834, King met and developed a friendship with Senator James Buchanan of Pennsylvania. The two men shared political sentiments, and both remained lifelong bachelors. In time their relationship became more intimate, and by 1836 the two shared a residence in the capital city. Eventually the comments about King's manners and appearance as a "southern gentleman" created amusement from some northerners and caused whispers and jokes, especially among political rivals.

Despite insults, King and Buchanan maintained their friendship and focused on governmental affairs. As early as 1838, the public interest was fixed on the Democratic Convention of 1840. Martin Van Buren was certain to be the presidential nominee, but there appeared to be no likely contender for a vice presidential candidate. The

William R. King, Senator from Alabama, (detail) drawn from life on stone by Charles Fenderich, printed by F. S. Duval, Philadelphia, 1840. Lithograph, 18 1/2 by 13 inches. (William H. Brantley Jr. Collection, Samford University, Birmingham.)

Democratic press in Alabama endorsed King's name at home, while Buchanan supporters rallied support for him in the North. In Pennsylvania, efforts to advance a Van Buren-King ticket proved popular because it could cost James K. Polk the vice presidential nomination and eliminate him as a threat to a Buchanan bid for the presidency in 1844. King had previously assured his friend that he would not run for president. As the election approached, King received scattered support in several states, but failed to be endorsed by his native North Carolina. Disappointed by the rejection, he eventually withdrew his name and endorsed a successful Democratic ticket of Van Buren and Richard Mentor Johnson of Kentucky.

By the end of the 1830s, interest in American statesmen had become a national—and at times an *international*—phenomenon. Artists struggled to capture accurate likenesses and present images in the most afford-

A DAGUERREOTYPE BY WHITEHURST, WHICH WAS LATER ENGRAVED BY W. H. DOUGAL, REVEALS THAT KING WAS A FADING RESEMBLANCE WHEN COMPARED TO THE HANDSOME OIL PORTRAITS IN HIS WASHINGTON HOME AND AT CHESTNUT HILL.

able way. Charles Fenderich (1805-1887), a native of Switzerland, was recognized in America as one of the European master lithographers. When the Paris-trained artist arrived in America, the country was in the wake of a financial panic and a period of intense nationalism. Settling first in Philadelphia and later in Washington, Fenderich struggled against a depressed economy by drawing portraits of a "new order" of statesmen, which included King, Buchanan, and an important coterie of individuals who made indelible marks on our nation's history.

Between 1837 and 1839, Fenderich created a lithograph of King on stone, which was then printed by F. S. Duval in Philadelphia. Listed as published in Washington City and titled with the facsimile signature, the likeness portrays a striking subject more youthful than his excess of fifty years. King is positioned in a half-length and somewhat romantic pose with a fur-collared cloak draped over his right shoulder. Previously thought by one researcher to be an image of King as a very youthful diplomat in Russia, the image is in actuality of a mature senator with a fur-collared prop frequently used by Fenderich's subjects.

As Fenderich drew on stone to publish his lithographs, some party advocates began to team King and Buchanan as a likely Democratic ticket for the 1844 election. As time passed, however, enthusiasm waned; it became apparent that Van Buren or Polk would be the party's leading presidential contender. In a letter to his niece, Catherine Ellis, King wrote that this time he was resigned to surrender the vice presidency "without one feeling of regret."

Above: *Silver Vegetable Dish, by Jean Baptiste Claude Odiot, Paris, France, ca. 1840. 9 by 12 inches. During King's tenure as minister to France (1844-1846) he and his niece, Catherine Ellis, hosted lavish dinners for the French court. In his will, King left his French silver, bronze, and porcelain to his nephew, William T. King, whose daughter, Alice DeVane King, sold it to the State of Alabama in the 1930s. (Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.)* ***Opposite page:*** *William R. King, (detail), frontispiece, engraving by W. H. Dougal from a daguerreotype by Whitehurst, Obituary Addresses on the Occasion of the Death of the Hon. William R. King, of Alabama, Vice President of the United States (Washington, D. C., 1854). Lithograph, 8 by 5 inches. (Author's collection.)*

By April 1844, the United States was uncertain of its diplomatic relations with France because of the proposed annexation of Texas. President John Tyler, concerned that France would join England in an effort to block annexation, prevailed upon William R. King to accept the position of minister to the Court of Louis

Philippe. Known for his discretion, sound judgment, and moderation, King was a likely choice.

In June, the fifty-eight-year-old King sailed from New York to Le Havre. Traveling with him were his widowed niece, Catherine Ellis, age 29; his nephew, Alfred Beck, 26, of Camden; his nephew, William Thomas King, 15; and his trusted body servant, John Bell. Arriving in Paris, King quickly received an audience with King Louis Philippe and charted his mission. Although he encountered problems in meetings with the prickly French foreign minister, François Guizot, he found the monarch himself receptive to his somewhat unorthodox method of negotiation. Using his newly commissioned silver dinner service by the renowned French maker, Jean Baptiste Claude Odiot, and fashionable Paris porcelain bearing his own monogram, King, with Mrs. Ellis, staged large and elaborate dinner parties and lavish entertainments. Regardless of the challenges presented by Guizot, the financially troubled Louis Philippe promised King French neutrality on the Texas question. Although the details of etiquette and diplomatic strategy remain a mystery, King's successful two-year mission won him praise as a "signal triumph over the sinuous course of European politics and statesmen." Completing his assignment, King and his family members returned to Washington, where he resigned as minister to France.

At home in Alabama, Dixon Hall Lewis, a congressman from Lowndes County and a strong states' rights advocate, had been appointed to fill King's senate vacancy. Lewis ran against King for a full term in 1847. Despite King's early predictions of success, he found it difficult to budge the almost 500-pound Lewis and reclaim his seat. The race, described by newspapers as "a meeting of the giants," created a deadlock in the Alabama legislature. Unable to gain a majority of the ballots after two days of voting, King pulled his name from the race, and Lewis was elected. The defeat marked King's only loss in a state election.

King remained popular with many Alabamians. Riverboat captain Luck Wainwright remembered: "He was the most attractive man I ever knew. When he was on the boat he held a levee nearly all the time. The passengers were continually crowding around him, not only to hear him talk of the great men he had known, but in admiration of his wonderful manners. I never knew a man that even approached him in polish."

Perhaps it was that polish combined with his experience and proven leadership that prompted Governor Reuben Chapman to appoint King to fill a senate vacancy in 1848. Re-elected to a full term the following year, King quickly moved back to the national forefront. With the sudden death of President Zachary Taylor in the summer of 1850, he was selected president pro tempore of the senate, a position he had held from 1836 to 1841. Regarded as an expert on senate rules and procedures, he assumed the responsibilities as the presiding officer, hoping to calm heated emotions and heal the Union. Yet the growing problems of sectionalism, slavery, and westward expansion shrouded his last years as a statesman. In 1848, King wrote that he "pleaded with patriotic men of every section to meet on the grounds of compromise." When California sought admission to the Union, he worked long hours and into the night with Henry Clay and a select committee of thirteen to draft the Compromise of 1850.

In 1852 the Alabama Democratic convention again endorsed King for vice president, proclaiming him, "the distinguished, long tried and ever faithful senator." At the party's national convention in Baltimore that June, King was the front-runner for the second office, while Buchanan and three other candidates competed for the presidential nomination. After a grueling battle, Buchanan's bid failed, and Pennsylvania refused to support one of his competitors. Instead the Buchanan camp backed General Franklin Pierce, a "dark horse" candidate from New Hampshire, in exchange for a ticket that

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included King. King was pleased with his own nomination but disappointed that Buchanan was not the presidential nominee.

As King faced the grueling demands of a campaign, he struggled with growing health problems. He was fatigued and complained of a serious cough. A daguerreotype by Whitehurst, which was later engraved by W. H. Dougal, reveals that King was a fading semblance when compared to the handsome oil portraits in his Washington home and at Chestnut Hill. He was one of the last senate leaders of his War Hawk generation. Calhoun, Clay, and Webster were dead.

Disregarding his poor health, he rallied Democratic support for a successful race against Whig candidate General Winfield Scott. King and other party leaders faced the daunting task of maintaining strong party unity and guarding against third party intrusion. When election results were announced, he was elated to learn that the Democrats had carried all but four states with 85.8 percent of the electoral vote. For King the election of Franklin Pierce as President was important "for the protection of Southern rights and the preservation of the Union."

William R. King, inaugural portrait by an unattributed artist, Ariadne Plantation, Matanzas, Cuba, 1853. Oil on canvas, 32 by 25 inches. The allegorical portrait depicts a sickly King seated in a red upholstered chair and tells the story of his impending demise. Storm clouds hover in a dark sky, indicating uncertainty. The mountain peak at Ariadne and the headboard of a deathbed loom in the lower right corner. Louise Julienne DuBoise, wife of Col. John Chartrand, and their son, Esteban, who studied in Paris, were artists. The portrait inherited by Catherine Ellis, remained in the Franklin King Beck house in Camden and was a gift to Daniel Fate Brooks from Evelyn Morgan Darwin in 1975. (Author's collection.)

Shortly thereafter, King was diagnosed with tuberculosis. His doctors advised refuge in a warm climate. He resigned his senate seat and his position as president pro tempore in late 1852 and left Norfolk bound for Cuba that January. Landing in Havana, he moved east into Matanzas and settled at Ariadne, the palatial sugar plantation of Colonel John Chartrand, near the town of Limonar. There he took advantage of the heat from Chartrand's mill, which he hoped would help his respiratory ailments. In the Matanzas harbor, the USS *Fulton* lay at anchor, waiting to carry King home as soon as he was able.

As weeks passed, however, King's health did not improve, and it became evident that he would be unable to return to Washington for the inauguration. If he were to be sworn in as vice president, Congress would need to work quickly and make a provision for him to be inaugurated in Cuba. On March 2, 1853, a special act was passed that permitted the U.S. Consul General William Sharkey to administer to King the oath of office in "Havana or another place on the Island."

The 300-foot peak overlooking Ariadne plantation offered an impressive backdrop for this unusual inauguration. As the feeble King was sworn in as vice president, two American soldiers raised him to his feet so he could view the colorful fields and brown mountain peaks. Following the ceremony, the large open carriage took the ailing vice president back to his quarters. William Rufus King had gained the distinction of being the first and only United States executive official to take the oath of office on foreign soil.

In the days that followed, King's health steadily worsened. No longer did he resemble his earlier likenesses. He was now the subject of his completed inaugural portrait, a sickly old gentleman prophetically holding his Book of Common Prayer. Realizing that death was near, he wanted to go home to Chestnut Hill. In a letter to Secretary of State William Marcy dated March 26, 1853, Consul General Skarkey wrote of King's condition, "He is very feeble and thus would seem to be but little ground to hope for a recovery. He proposes to leave the Island on the 6th of April."

Ruins of Ariadne-Limonar, Matanzas, Cuba, photograph by Daniel Fate Brooks, June, 2001. The plantation was originally operated as a cafetel *(coffee plantation) called Laberinth, but after a devastating hurricane, Col. John Chartrand rebuilt it as an* inhengo *(sugar plantation). He believed the storm to be a sign of good luck and renamed it La Ariadne for the idea that the mythological goddess had shown him the way from coffee to sugar. The manor house and dependencies were destroyed during the Spanish American War. (Courtesy Daniel Fate Brooks.)*

After a tiring voyage aboard the USS *Fulton*, King arrived in Mobile. He was not quite home. He remained in the port city's Battle House Hotel for a few days' rest before boarding a river packet for his final trip. Running full steam from Mobile to King's landing, the boat reportedly broke several previous records for speed on the Alabama River. At 6:00 P.M. the following evening of April 18, 1853, King died in the front room of Chestnut Hill, surrounded by his family and faithful servants. He had been an elected official for forty-five years and vice president for less than a month.

In the weeks following the death of Vice President William Rufus King, his fellow countrymen acknowledged that he was no ordinary man. Congressman Milton Latham of California remembered: "In all that belonged to him individually, Mr. King was the very type of an American gentleman. His mind and heart were of American growth, while his eminent virtues served to illustrate our National character." AH