

Samuel J. Hesnecker: Politician and Statesman

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Samuel James Hesnecker was born into a poor home in Hicksville, Kentucky, on 29 February, 1869. As the youngest of thirteen children of a debt-ridden farmer, Samuel never went to school until he turned fourteen, when most of his older brothers and sisters had already started work and there was enough money for Samuel to study.

Samuel, however, could only read and write a little by the time he stopped going to school at age fifteen. He did better at shady deals with small traders and, at age seventeen, he was arrested, convicted for fraud and sentenced to five months' jail. Prison changed his life; he later wrote that it was the first time he "had ever done any serious thinking." (Hesnecker, 1932, p. 6.)

He then started employment as an errand boy in a lawyer's office. This gave access to legal books, and he worked late to borrow them, studying law in the little spare time he had. He was very clever and before long became a clerk. He then asked to study from the lawyer himself, Ebenezer J. Kunkle. Green describes those years:

Perhaps the combination of gifted teacher, motivated student, and hard work changed Hesnecker. He passed the state's bar examination for lawyers and, aged twenty-two, was the youngest lawyer ever admitted to the bar in the state of Kentucky. His youthfulness and energy made him immediately well-known in Kentucky and he tended to exploit his local fame to secure clients and gain friends. (Green, 1995, p. 53.)

He was soon bored with routine legal work and established a practice of his own specializing in financial and taxation law. Business was brisk and he won almost all his cases. The only one he lost was a mistake from the start; there were five independent witnesses to a bribe given to a taxation officer and Hesnecker's client was convicted. (Hesnecker, 1932, p. 74.)

His ambition and growing reputation brought powerful and wealthy friends, including Senator Harry Richards and Senator Bertrand Stiggenbup. At the age of twenty-nine, Hesnecker was elected to the Senate.

In that same year, he was also married to Ethel Marigold Stumpf, the well-known eldest daughter of Hicksville's long-serving mayor, Benjamin Stumpf.

The change to Washington life was dramatic. He served on several powerful committees, and won important rights for arrested embezzlers. He won major tax concessions for American lawyers serving in government. He also managed to limit government spending on used pencils, and eventually to ban their purchase completely. (Green, 1995, pp. 6-9.) It is silent memorial to his political skill that the U.S government still does not buy them. Hesnecker also gained important government contracts for his law firm, mainly in negotiating government deals with small African colonies. (Smith, 1978, p. 284.)

Government contracts made him wealthy and he founded a theme park called Hesneckerland in the downtown area of his native Hicksville. The theme park was later renamed PoliticsAsUsual and still stands as an influential institution. Hesnecker died in Washington at age seventy-nine while still in office. (Green, 1995, pp. 98.)

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