

John Wilson, Speaker of the House

A Clark County man served Arkansas as a leading politician in the territorial period and the days of early statehood. In one of his leadership roles, John Wilson served as the State of Arkansas's first Speaker of the House in the 1830s. It was in this capacity that he participated in one of the most memorable events in Arkansas history---a violent death on the floor of the House of Representatives in 1837.

John Wilson was born in 1787 in Virginia, and his family moved to Kentucky when he was quite young. He later moved to Missouri where he married, before arriving in Clark County, Arkansas, in 1829. The Wilsons lived in Blakelytown (later known as Arkadelphia) for a few years before moving to the north of the small village. There, he farmed land just to the north of what is now Ouachita Baptist University's main campus and built a grist mill there. Not much is known about the mill, except that even though Wilson operated it for a relatively brief time, the creek where it stood still retains the name, "Mill Creek."

John Wilson never lost an election. He was a popular politician, and many suggested he could have been governor, had he run for the office. Not only did Wilson serve as Speaker of the House, but he was also appointed president of the newly-created Real Estate Bank of Arkansas. According to local historian Farrar Newberry, Wilson acquired the nickname of "old mule ears" as a result of the unusual habit of wiggling his ears when he became excited about a political matter.

During a session of the General Assembly in December of 1837, the Senate sent a bill to the House intended to "encourage the killing of wolves." The bill provided for the payment of \$3 for each wolf scalp delivered to a justice of the peace, who would issue a receipt to the hunter. The receipt would then be submitted to the county treasurer for actual payment. In the ensuing discussion regarding the bill, one legislator joked that the State Treasurer should pay the \$3. Another suggestion offered up was to make the wolf scalps themselves legal tender. The sarcasm didn't stop there, for then, J.J. Anthony of northeast Arkansas moved that wolf hunters obtain their receipts from the President of the Real Estate Bank!

Anthony's proposal caused quite a stir. Speaker Wilson declared him to be "out of order" and asked him to be seated. Anthony refused---twice! Wilson left his chair and approached Anthony on the floor. Anthony pulled out his long knife and Wilson did the same. Grandison Royston of Hempstead County put a chair between the two men, but to no avail. They began to slash at each other, and Anthony drew first blood, almost severing Wilson's hand. Wilson picked up the chair, held it up, then pushed his knife into Anthony's chest, killing him instantly.

Wilson was indicted on a murder charge, with the trial held in Saline County following a change of venue. He was acquitted, probably because Anthony had been the first to draw his knife, although some suggested it may have been because of his political connections. Even with the turmoil and his departure from the House of Representatives, Wilson's popularity continued. He was subsequently elected Clark County Judge in 1838 and then to the House of Representatives from Pike County in 1840, to which he had moved. He left the state in the 1840s, and died in Texas in 1865.