

Biographies of West Virginia statehood leaders were prepared by Marshall University Humanities Program graduate students enrolled in Dr. Billy Joe Peyton's Fall 2010 "Historical Studies" class at Marshall's South Charleston campus.

By Kelly L. Pruett

Emmet Jones O'Brien

Emmet Jones O'Brien (May 14, 1819-February 17, 1888), delegate from Barbour county, was a son of Daniel and Hannah (Norris) O'Brien. He was born in Beverly, Randolph County, and was of the second generation of his family in America. His father immigrated to America in 1796. After eight years as a merchant in Baltimore, Maryland, he became a merchant in Beverly, (West) Virginia. His son, Emmet J., Jr., was a stonecutter and a stone mason, who, together with his brother, Daniel O'Brien, built the abutments for the wooden bridge which spans Tygart River at Philippi, and for a bridge of the same construction which spans the Buckhannon River near its mouth. Before the War of Secession, he had been commissioned a brigadier general of militia. Unlike most Virginia militia officers, he opposed secession and took an active part in the formation of West Virginia. He was later a senator in the Fourth and Fifth legislatures.

Like most of those responsible for the formation of West Virginia, O'Brien was a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church. He was also a Democrat. While yet a young man, he married Martha Ann, daughter of Jonathan and Elizabeth (Reger) Hall of Big Skin Creek in present Lewis County, who bore him four children: Alonza Lee; Daniel U. who married Mellie Whiting, daughter of Samuel Whiting of Glenville, Gilmer County; Mary Lillian who married William M. Arnold of Gilmer County; and William Smithe who married Emma White of Lewis

County, was a representative in the Seventieth Congress, and served as secretary of state of West Virginia.

Sources:

O'Brien Family Records; Barbour County Records.

Ambler, Charles H., Francis Haney Atwood and William B. Mathews, editors, *Debates and Proceedings of the First Constitutional Convention of West Virginia (1861-1863)*, pp. 81-82, Huntington: Gentry Brothers Printers.