

WILLIAM CRAWFORD, 1784-1849
SECOND FEDERAL DISTRICT JUDGE OF ALABAMA

William Crawford was a Virginian, like his predecessor Charles Tait. He moved to the Territorial Capital of St. Stephens in 1817, where he was Federal District Attorney. In that office, he prosecuted a postmaster named Gilmer, who had stolen money from the mails. Gilmer ambushed and shot Crawford in the side with a muskey. Crawford narrowly escaped death. He was elected president of the Tombeckbe Bank of St. Stephens in 1818. Crawford ran for U.S. Senator but was defeated by the powerful William Rufus King. In 1826, he was appointed as the second Federal District Judge.



The pioneer town of St. Stephens waned after the state capital moved to Cahawba in 1819. Crawford moved to Mobile, where he lived the rest of his life. As a trustee of the University of Alabama from 1824 to 1828, he helped lay all the plans for that institution before it actually opened its doors in 1831.

The historian Willis Brewer wrote that “Judge Crawford was neither sociable nor popular, for he was a man of strong antipathies, and austere bearing.” More popular was his elegant wife, Winnifred Fitts, whom he married at St. Stephens in 1820. When the Crawfords were in Philadelphia in 1837, she was painted by Thomas Sully. The portrait is the artist’s masterpiece and the jewel of the collections of the Alabama Department of Archives and History. This work is more widely known today than Judge Crawford’s tenure on the court, which lasted until his death in Mobile in 1849.

(Copy of a portrait of William Crawford by an unidentified artist, circa 1835.)