

The Bandera PROPHECY

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Today in Texas History

By Bandera Spirits of Texas

On this day in 1923, Jim Wells, the longtime Democratic boss of South Texas, died. James B. Wells Jr. was born on St. Joseph Island in 1850, the son of a lieutenant in the Texas Navy.

In 1878 the younger Wells formed a law partnership with Stephen Powers and settled at Brownsville, where he lived for the rest of his life. Powers was active in local politics and was a cofounder of the Democratic Blue Club of Cameron County.

Wells married Powers's niece, Pauline Kleiber, in 1880 and soon emerged as Powers's chief lieutenant and heir apparent. Wells consolidated his control over the Cameron County Blue Club and eventually extended his influence over the Democratic organizations of Hidalgo, Starr and Duval counties, where he oversaw the rise of bosses who acknowledged Wells's leadership on regional, state, and national questions.

Wells influenced national politics as well by shepherding the early congressional career of John Nance Garner. Despite his political astuteness and record of accomplishment, Wells could not survive the changing demographic structure in the region, the rising tide of racial hatred following the Mexican border raids of 1915 and 1916, and his loss of favor at the state level.

His death came three years after the collapse of his Cameron County machine. Jim Wells County is named in his honor.