

The 27th Legislature convened in regular session in early 1901 amid the sensationalism of two historic events. Only four months earlier, on September 4, 1900, a catastrophic hurricane had struck Galveston. Registering winds of 120 miles an hour, it destroyed half the city and caused an estimated 6,000 fatalities. Then, while Texans were still responding to the shock of the hurricane, the state was jolted by yet another momentous occurrence. On January 18, 1901, the third day of the legislative session, A. F. Lucas brought in a gusher at Spindletop, near Beaumont. The Spindletop field, which by the next year was responsible for an incredible one-fourth of the United States' total oil production, signaled a century in which the petroleum industry was to join agriculture as a cornerstone of the Texas economy.

The speaker of the house during the 27th Legislature was Robert E. Prince, who was born October 1, 1859, in Coahoma County, Mississippi. During his youth, Prince's family moved to Tennessee, where he attended a military school and then completed his collegiate coursework at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. Shortly thereafter, he was graduated from the Cumberland University School of Law in Lebanon, Tennessee.

In 1882, Prince came to Texas, settling in Corsicana, where he resided for the remainder of his life, practicing civil law under two successive partnerships. His first major association with politics came via his attendance as a delegate to the 1892 Democratic National Convention. Six years later, he was elected to the 26th Legislature as a member of the house of representatives. Reelected to the 27th Legislature, Prince, despite only one term of experience, was chosen speaker.

That first term as state representative was both feverish and productive. During the 26th Legislature, Prince served on no fewer than nine committees, chairing one of them. More important, he authored the state's first legislation regulating the drilling of oil and gas wells. Passage of Prince's measure, which prescribed precautionary procedures to be followed in well operations, meant that Texas had a regulatory statute on the books in advance of the drilling expansion occasioned by the Spindletop discovery.

Prince's term as speaker in the 27th Legislature witnessed the passage of other important measures. In response to the hurricane, the legislature passed an act enabling Galveston to retain for its own use all property taxes due the state. Renewed intermittently by subsequent legislatures, the act helped the city to rebuild.

The 27th Legislature also proposed a constitutional amendment creating the poll tax. Submitted to and approved by the electorate, the measure at the time was considered reformist and was designed to curb illegal voting practices and to raise money for a school fund that was not yet the beneficiary of oil and gas royalties from state-owned lands. Eventually, however, the tax was to come under criticism as restricting the right to vote, leading to its being struck down in 1966 by the United States Supreme Court.

After his term as speaker, Prince returned to Corsicana. In later life he held additional public offices, serving as a member of the State Board of Education and as a trustee of the State Orphans' Home located in Corsicana. Prince died in that city on March 23, 1925.