

COLORADO GOVERNORS

John Long Routt



John Long Routt, the last territorial and first state governor of Colorado, was born in Eddyville, Kentucky on April 25, 1826. Soon after his birth, his family moved to Bloomington, Illinois, where Routt obtained a public school education. Later he became a carpenter and was especially interested in architecture. While living in Illinois, Routt became a town alderman and was elected Sheriff of McLean County. Routt's civil career, however, was interrupted by the Civil War, during which time he began to display some of his remarkable talents for organization and leadership. Routt organized the 94th Illinois Volunteer Regiment, was elected Captain, and served heroically at the battle of Vicksburg and Prairie Grove. Attaining a reputation as a resourceful and valorous individual, Routt was promoted to Colonel by General Ulysses S. Grant.

Routt returned to Illinois in 1865 to find himself on the Republican ticket for county treasurer, a post he held successfully for two terms. In 1869 Routt was appointed chief clerk to the second assistant postmaster general, a post he relinquished due to his appointment as a United States Marshall in Illinois. Routt held this office until 1871 when he became the Second Assistant Postmaster General. After ten years and four government positions, President Grant rewarded Routt with the Territorial Governorship of Colorado on March 29, 1875.

Routt began his position at the culmination of the statehood movement. Due to the work of Thomas Patterson and Jerome Chaffee, House Bill 435, which provided for a Colorado State government, passed through both houses of Congress. Thus, the first year of Routt's territorial administration was defined by ongoing deliberations concerning the development of an acceptable Colorado constitution. The constitutional process took nine months, but on August 1, 1876 Colorado officially became the 38th state of the Union.

With the advent of statehood came the first election. Routt won the gubernatorial election without making any public speeches, a feat not repeated until the campaign of the popular Billy Adams. Routt's second term was defined more by his personal successes than his influence on the development of the state's political system.

One of his first challenges as Governor of the State of Colorado was to take care of increasingly violent incidents at Creede. Squatters challenged the legitimacy of the State's claim to the land and threatened to hang anyone who defied them. Pressure to send troops in to end this insurrection resulted in Routt traveling to Creede in order to negotiate a peaceful settlement, which he was able to do, thus ending the violence.

Another problem for Routt was the issue surrounding county valuations. The State Board of Equalization disagreed with the counties' assessments, and lowered their valuations. The case was taken to the

Supreme Court which ruled in favor of the Board. As a result, the county assessors reported these lower valuations which caused a depletion of the State's coffers. Furthermore, confined expenditures and appropriations stunted the development of the State's infrastructure due to its poor credit, adding to the financial woes of the fledgling state.

Routt gained political favor, at least from much of the female citizenry, because of his support for women's suffrage. He arranged a speaking tour of Colorado for Susan B. Anthony and personally directed and escorted her on her trip. His wife, Eliza, became the first registered female voter after women received the right to vote in 1893.

With news of silver strikes in Leadville, Routt traveled there to investigate and prepare for the likely mining hysteria that would occur. His investigation became a lucrative business venture when he invested ten thousand dollars in the famous Morning Star mine. Disregarding his gubernatorial responsibilities, Routt worked incessantly to build his fortune. With Routt focusing all of his energy into his mining enterprises, Frederick Pitkin easily won the governor's race in 1879. In April of that year, Routt hit the proverbial jackpot when the Morning Star produced ore that reaped an average income of seventy-two thousand dollars a month.

Routt eventually sold the mine for a million dollars and continued to invest his new found wealth into ranching, irrigation projects, mining, and many other aspects of Colorado's industry. During this period Routt served on the Board of Capitol Managers, was a member of the Stock Inspection Board, became the Director of the Leadville National Mining & Milling Co., took over the directorship of the Denver, Utah, & Pacific Railroad, and was elected director of the First National Bank. These responsibilities seemed not to have exhausted Routt since he also served as Mayor of Denver from 1883 to 1885. Routt then ran for the United States Senate against Nathaniel Hill but lost the nomination by four votes. Despite this loss, Routt ran for the governorship and on January 13, 1891 was again inaugurated as Colorado's seventh state governor.

Routt's third term as governor was dominated by Republican infighting. James H. Brown was the entrenched leader of what was called the "gang", and H.H. Eddy was the head of the opposing Republican caucus aptly named the "gang smashers." After clashes occurred on the floor of the House of Representatives concerning committee appointments and the appointment of the Speaker, the Supreme Court had to intervene and decide the validity of the legislature's decisions.

Another controversy during his third term was the creation of a Board of Fire and Police Commissioners of Denver, an act that effectively transferred the power of the mayor's office into the hands of the governor. Although there was much discussion and scrutiny concerning this decision, it was overshadowed by the gridlock and violence occurring in the State Legislature.

John Routt died in Denver on August 13, 1907, after claiming the distinction of being the champion office holder in the United States, performing services for the nation and state of Colorado for more than fifty consecutive years.