



Nehemiah G. Ordway

Dakota Images

Nehemiah G. Ordway, the seventh governor of Dakota Territory, was born on 10 November 1828 in Warner, New Hampshire. In the 1840s and 1850s, he worked in the mercantile and banking businesses and was a county sheriff. He also became active in the newly formed Republican party and was chairman of the New Hampshire party during Abraham Lincoln's 1860 bid for the presidency. After the election, Lincoln appointed him to a position in the Post Office Department. From 1862 to 1875, Ordway served as sergeant-at-arms for the United States House of Representatives and then returned to his home state to serve in the state legislature. In 1880, the New Hampshire congressional delegation recommended him for the position of governor of Dakota Territory, reportedly so that he could look after state banking investments in the West.

In May 1880, President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed Ordway as governor of Dakota. His four-year tenure, 1880-1884, was marked with controversy and confusion. The northern and southern portions of the territory were engaged in a power struggle, the railroads were beginning to dominate the politics and spoils system, and the population, counties, and towns were growing at unprecedented rates. Into this political stew, Governor Ordway brought a "ring" of eastern friends and family. His son George, a railroad agent in Pierre, was appointed to the first board of commissioners of Hughes County and then became territorial auditor. Friends of the governor benefited from county seat appointments and other government dealings in ways that suggested that they accepted bribes. The governor himself was not directly involved in such schemes, but he was censured by a territorial grand jury in 1883 and indicted in 1884 for "corrupt practices" relating to the creation of new counties. While the indictment was quashed on the grounds that a federal official could not be tried in a territorial court, Ordway was not reappointed to the governorship in 1884.

After 1884, Ordway, who had invested heavily in Dakota Territory, continued to reside in Bismarck. His investments included land, a newspaper, and at least two banks—the First National Bank of Pierre and the Capital National Bank of Bismarck. He also became a lobbyist for the Northern Pacific Railroad, and in Washington, D.C., he supported bills for the admittance of Dakota as one state—a move favored by the Northern Pacific. In the 1890s, Ordway's interest in the territory declined, and he returned to the East to manage two large farms that he had inherited. He died in New Hampshire in 1909.

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