

Louis Kossuth Church, the only Democrat to serve as governor of Dakota Territory, faced opposition with dignity as he helped to shape the future states of South Dakota and North Dakota.

Church was born in Brooklyn, New York, on 11 December 1846. He attended Hudson River Institute at Claverack, New York, and studied law under former New York supreme court judge N. B. Moore. After his admittance to the bar in 1872, Church practiced law in New York City. In 1882, he was elected to the New York State Assembly, where he became an ardent supporter of then-governor Grover Cleveland. In 1885, President Cleveland appointed Church to be associate justice for the Fifth Judicial District of the Supreme Court of Dakota Territory, with chambers in Huron. One year later, the president nominated Church to be the ninth governor of Dakota Territory.

Although Church had been known as a competent, impartial judge, support for him evaporated quickly after he assumed office in Bismarck on 17 February 1887. His status as a "carpetbagger" and as a Democrat in a Republican territory made his administration difficult. A fiscal conservative, the governor kept a tight rein on the territorial budget and vetoed several proposed new territorial institutions, a move that cost him political friends.

Finally, his stance in favor of delaying statehood until Dakota could be admitted as a single, Democratic entity produced calls for his impeachment from the "home rule" faction of his own party. Church's hopes for the admission of Dakota as a single, powerful Democratic state were disappointed in February 1889 with passage of the Omnibus Bill creating the states of North Dakota and South Dakota. He resigned on 9 March 1889 and left the capital after attending the inauguration of his successor, Arthur C. Mellette.

Church returned to Huron to practice law, moving to Washington State in 1890. There he helped to incorporate the town of Everett, where he also served on the chamber of commerce and helped to organize the Everett General Hospital and Trinity Church. He remained active in politics, chairing the Washington Democratic State Convention in 1892.

Louis K. Church died on Thanksgiving Day 1897 while on a trip to Juneau, Alaska. His wife, Emma Murphy Wood, and eight children survived him.

by Jodi Holmes Tolley

Dakota Images



Louis K. Church

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