

The Private Letters of Governor Louis K. Church to President Grover Cleveland, 1887-1889

edited by Leonard Schlup

Louis K. Church, governor of Dakota Territory from 1887 to 1889, was a colorful figure who served during a time of vast social and economic change on the Northern Great Plains. The discovery of gold in the Black Hills drew thousands of prospectors and entrepreneurs to western Dakota Territory beginning in 1874. Between 1878 and 1887, farmers and speculators poured into eastern Dakota, acquiring millions of acres of public lands offered by the federal government under the Homestead Act. In 1870, the region had a population of about 10,000; by 1890, the number of residents had soared to nearly 340,000.¹ These events betokened growth and prosperity, and an optimistic Church took office on 17 February 1887, pledging to "hold the balance between the sections of the territory in justice, rectitude, and fairness."² Despite his intentions, the governor soon found himself at the center of a political quagmire with his fellow Democrats, the legislature, and the

1. Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 3d ed., rev. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 159. Information on the territorial period can be found in several excellent works. See, for example, Howard R. Lamar, *Dakota Territory, 1861-1889: A Study of Frontier Politics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1956); Harold E. Briggs, "The Great Dakota Boom, 1879 to 1886," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly* 4 (Jan. 1930): 78-108; and Watson Parker, *Gold in the Black Hills* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966).

2. Quoted in George W. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, and George Martin Smith, ed., *South Dakota: Its History and Its People*, 5 vols. (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Co., 1915), 2: 1467.

territory's citizens over the issues of patronage, appropriations, and, especially, division and statehood.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1846, Church began a career as a lawyer in New York City. From 1882 to 1885, he represented the first district of Queens County in the New York State Assembly. There, he worked closely with Republican legislator and future president Theodore Roosevelt in fighting Tammany Hall and promoting educational reforms. In 1885, President Grover Cleveland appointed Church, an acquaintance from Cleveland's days as governor of New York, to succeed Judge Seward Smith as associate justice for the Fifth (Huron) Judicial District of the Supreme Court of Dakota Territory. On 13 December 1886, Cleveland nominated Church to be the ninth governor of Dakota Territory. A number of prominent Dakotans, Democrat and Republican alike, applauded the appointment, for Church had earned a reputation for fairness and integrity as a judge. Shortly after his nomination, Church left Huron, the site of his court chambers, for the territorial capital at Bismarck. He took office on 17 February 1887, becoming the first Democrat in territorial history to serve as governor.³

Even though it had a promising start, Church's tenure was marked by controversy. The governor frequently exercised his veto power in an attempt to reduce excessive appropriations, a move that cost him political friends. In keeping with an 1886 mandate that territories live within their budgets, Church vetoed all bills for new territorial institutions except the reform school at Plankinton. Among the proposed institutions he denied were a third territorial university at Aberdeen and the soldiers' home at Hot

3. Doane Robinson, *History of South Dakota*, 2 vols. (Chicago: B. F. Bowen & Co., 1904), 1: 329, 735; Earl S. Pomeroy, *The Territories and the United States, 1861-1890: Studies in Colonial Administration* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1947), p. 128; Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 2: 1405, 1468. The role of the territorial governor has been analyzed in Earl S. Pomeroy, "The American Colonial Office," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 30 (Mar. 1944): 521-32, and Elvin L. Valentine, "The American Territorial Governor" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1928).

Springs, both of which were funded over the governor's veto.⁴

Church's handling of overcrowding at the territorial hospital for the insane at Yankton further alienated many citizens and enraged his political opponents. Citing extravagant spending and administrative irregularities, Church demanded the resignation of the hospital board of trustees, whose principal officers were Republicans. They refused to vacate, and the dispute dragged on for months, ending only when the courts affirmed the governor's right to appoint new board members. With a newly configured board in place, construction of additional wings for the facility began, but work progressed slowly as incompetent managers and faulty materials resulted in falling walls and two worker fatalities.⁵

Among the many issues Church faced as governor, the question of statehood assumed gigantic proportions. Like former governor Nehemiah G. Ordway, a number of leading Democrats, and the Northern Pacific Railway Company (all of whose interests lay in northern Dakota), Church opposed division of the territory into two states. Recalling his New York experience, Church pointed out the political advantages of having one state with a large congressional delegation in Washington, D.C. His argument, however, failed to put the issue in its proper perspective. The two sections had different political and commercial orientations, with northern Dakota tied to Minnesota and southern Dakota linked with Iowa and the cities of Chicago and Milwaukee. Moreover, the denial of statehood was not in the best interests of the people, who chafed under federal control and the patronage system. Yet Church, along with President Cleveland and the national Democratic party,

4. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 2: 1474-75; Robinson, *History of South Dakota*, 1: 331.

5. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 2: 1459, 1478-92.

*Governor Louis K. Church
experienced a stormy
two years in office as
Dakota Territory moved
toward division and
statehood.*



favored a prolongation of territorial tutelage until the party had gained enough strength in the region to enable Dakota to enter the Union as a Democratic bastion.⁶

The divisive statehood issue and the control of patronage were the crucial issues that split Democrats during Church's tenure, resulting in two quarreling groups—the "home rule" and "carpetbag" factions, with the latter opposing division. The governor battled most frequently with Merritt H. Day and Michael L. McCormack. As the follow-

6. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 221; Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 202-3; Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 2: 1475-76. Some prominent Republicans, including former governor John L. Pennington, also endorsed the single-state movement. O. S. Gifford to Arthur C. Mellette, 17 May 1886, Arthur C. Mellette Papers, State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society, Pierre, S.Dak.; Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 2: 1811.

ing letters will show, Church quickly locked horns with Day, a southern Dakotan from Bon Homme County who also engaged in Black Hills mining. Day represented the territory's old-line, rank-and-file Democrats who had long favored division and statehood. He had been under consideration for the gubernatorial appointment in 1887 but withdrew his name, supposedly with the tacit understanding of Cleveland and Church that he would become territorial auditor. The appointment never materialized, and political rivalry between the two men escalated. McCormack, young and politically ambitious, was a wealthy Grand Forks merchant and former Red River steamboat captain. As territorial secretary during the Church administration, he vied with the governor for the power to dispense patronage.⁷

The anti-Church sentiment among some Democrats reached such intense proportions by 1888 that various party leaders, including Day, sought the governor's removal. In May of 1888, territorial Democrats met in Watertown to choose delegates to the Democratic National Convention to be held in Saint Louis in June.⁸ In Watertown, Day and the home-rule faction mounted an impeachment attempt, issuing a statement calling the Church administration "imbecile, partisan, and trafficking." Specifically, the indictment accused Church of using a combination of "threats and promises" to coerce government officials on various levels into influencing caucuses and conventions throughout the territory. In doing so, the governor had "sought to defraud and intimidate the democracy of Dakota out of its rightful voice . . . and thus brought shame and reproach upon the party." The

7. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 2: 1408, 1519, 1523, 1813-14; Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, p. 202; Day to Cleveland, 6 Nov. 1886, 10 Mar. 1888, McCormack to Daniel S. Lamont, 13 Jan. 1887, McCormack to Cleveland, 31 Jan. 1887, all in Grover Cleveland Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

8. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 2: 1519.

*anti-Church coterie further charged that the governor had "grossly misrepresented the true non-office holding, non-office asking democrats of Dakota in his reports to the President." They concluded: "His public acts and utterances brand him as a boor, totally disqualified from appreciating the wants and wishes of an intelligent and free people. His administration of affairs . . . has been unrelieved by a single act of enlightened statesmanship, or wise party policy."*⁹ Day's faction formed its own delegation to the Democratic National Convention but was thoroughly humbled when the convention's credentials committee refused to seat them.

Although in the end Church managed to maintain control of Dakota Territory's party machinery and avoid a forced departure from office, he had alienated many people and found himself at loggerheads with most legislators. In 1889, the last territorial legislature, a body controlled by Republicans, virtually ignored the Democratic chief executive during the immediate prelude to statehood and a new government. Church was replaced as governor in March 1889.¹⁰

During his stormy two years in office, Governor Church frequently corresponded with President Grover Cleveland on matters pertaining to affairs in Dakota Territory. These private letters reveal a great deal about the man, his programs, his official relationships, and his reactions to the events that engulfed his administration. Approximately forty letters make up the Church Collection in the Grover Cleveland Papers at the Library of Congress. These letters, which are not deposited with the official territorial papers in the National Archives, date from the time of Church's gubernatorial appointment in 1886 to 1895, when he was practicing law in the state of Washington.¹¹

9. *Ibid.*, 2: 1521.

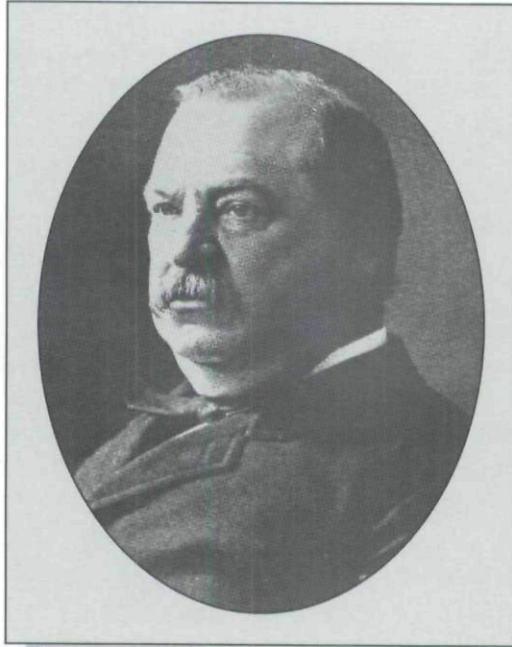
10. *Ibid.*, 2: 1523, 1563-66.

11. Additional information on Church and Dakota Territory can be mined from the L. Q. C. Lamar Papers, University of Mississippi Library, Oxford, Miss.; the William F. Vilas Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.; and the Donald M. Dickinson Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress.

Winter 1996

Letters of Louis K. Church 233

President Grover Cleveland had the loyal support of Governor Church, who kept him informed about the machinations of the territory's politicians.



Eleven letters from the Church Collection are presented here, ranging from 13 January 1887 to 15 February 1889. In editing this correspondence for publication, repetitious and irrelevant subject material has been omitted and replaced with ellipses. The editor has also added a minimal amount of punctuation in instances where it was needed to clarify meaning.

Bismarck, D.T. Jany. 13 1887

Mr. President

I arrived here Monday, and as yet I have not heard anything regarding my confirmation. I have concluded to write you and suggest as to whether or not it would not be well for you to forward me my commission as for a va-

cancy by reason of Gov. Pierce's resignation.¹² There are some things that have led me to think that an attempt may be quietly on foot to delay my confirmation; and use it as one of the means of compelling me to come to terms on various appointments; and thus perpetuate the power of an element I don't want anything to do with.

Day for instance regardless of all principles of propriety is urging his appointment as Territorial Auditor; if you think it wise I will do so, but if left to my own inclination I will not. I have no faith in his integrity and I feel that the appointment of territorial auditor & treasurer should be such that the same will commend my administration. Further, they should be men on whom I can rely for advice, not only as regards territorial matters, but likewise such information as you may require at my hands.

I feel that I cannot afford to have men in these places that are not in sympathy with myself. Day likewise is giving out the idea that there was an understanding that he should be appointed auditor; to appoint him will be to verify this idea, and the consequence will be instead of harmony the opposite. . . . I know him well enough to foresee that his appointment will be followed by his giving out "I told you so" and consequently his influence will be greater than the executive, and . . . cause me great annoyance during my entire administration. . . . I sincerely believe the best elements are not in favor of his appointment.

I would rather create some antagonism with a certain element than run the risk of doing any act which I am fearful might develop badly. I have made no selections. I am carefully casting about for men fit for the important positions at my disposal.

I have no care for the future. My only desire is to fill the executive chair with credit. I expect a thorny path but

12. Gilbert A. Pierce, a prominent politician, author, and newspaper editor, was the Republican governor of Dakota Territory from 1884 to 1887. At the time he sent this letter, Church had established temporary headquarters at the Sheridan House in Bismarck.

Winter 1996

Letters of Louis K. Church 235

if I can so discharge my duty that it will in the minds of all good citizens reflect credit on your administration, I will be satisfied. . . .

Gov. Pierce has been very kind to me. I appreciate [him] as a high toned gentleman, and took it upon myself to tell him of your good opinion regarding him; and I am pleased to be able to say he appreciates your kind & generous treatment.

He is anxious I should qualify as he has made business arrangements for the future, but of course I cannot under the circumstances. I shall return to Huron to day & will not return [to Bismarck] until I hear something definite.

In speaking of Day do not think me prejudiced. I do so after careful consideration. You told me to write frankly to you at all times. It might be politic to give him something but I feel it would be a great mistake to appoint him to one of the positions I speak of.

Sincerely,
L K Church

Huron, Dakota Jany 17, 1887

Mr. President

As I was about leaving Bismarck on Thursday last I wrote you in some haste. I did not intend to indicate I thought an attempt might be made by Democrats to delay my confirmation, but that there was some reason for my thinking such might be the case among the Republican office holders & office seekers. The patronage is considerable, and as the legislature is limited to a session of sixty days and the Council confirms most of the appointments you will readily see how important delay is to these people.

I am strongly of the opinion the Council as organized is friendly. It consists of 24 members, three of whom are

Democrats, & their votes elected the President of the Council exacting a promise from him & his supporters that I should be fairly treated.

The utmost good feeling seems to exist among our people. I have been visited by many from all parts of the Territory and . . . all assure me of hearty support. The only real embarrassing question is the desire of Mr. Day to be appointed auditor. I think however that can be got over [and] you can be assured I shall be as diplomatic as possible in all things.

Sincerely,
L K Church

I desire to say I have the utmost confidence in Gov. Pierce & do not include him in my general remark. If I can get him to accept I desire to put him on one of the important commissions.

L K C

Bismarck, Feb'y 28th, 1887

Mr. President:

Dear Sir:-

I qualified and entered upon my duties on the 17th inst. I have contemplated writing you for several days past, but the mass of business that had accumulated in the executive office was such, and the army of office-seekers has been so great, that my entire time has been consumed.

There are several matters that I would like to speak of, but, recognising the fact that your time is valuable, I will not undertake to speak at length regarding any particular matter, as, immediately on the close of the Legislature—which will be on the 12th proximo—I will come to Washington and make a full report of my stewardship.

During the period of time which elapsed between the acceptance of the resignation of Governor Pierce, and my qualification, Secretary Mc Cormack discharged the duties of the executive. There has been some comment excited in the community by reason of the fact that Mr. Mc Cormack granted a pardon to a man by the name of Magill, who was serving a term of imprisonment for the murder of one Bessey. I will only say at this time that the matter had been passed upon by Governor Pierce, and, while here previous to my confirmation, Governor Pierce informed me that he had denied the pardon several months previously, and that there was great influence being brought for the purpose of inducing him to grant the pardon before his term expired, but that he had declined to do so and would let the matter stand over until his successor qualified, and any statement he had to make in the matter he would make to me. I do not wish to say anything that would have a tendency to be unfair or unkind to Mr. Mc Cormack, but, recognizing the fact that there has been considerable comment in the community in reference to the action of the Secretary, I feel that it is my duty to speak to you in reference to the matter, as I do not wish to be held responsible, directly or indirectly, for any act of Secretary Mc Cormack. I will inform you fully in reference to the details of the matter when I come to Washington.

The appointments that I have made, so far, were John D. Benton, of Fargo, for Treasurer,—a gentleman who stands high in the community in North Dakota, and who is considered as an “admission-as-a-whole” man. Mr. Benton . . . is an “A No. 1” man in every respect. Mr. James A. Ward, whom I appointed Auditor of the Territory, is a wholesale grocer in Sioux Falls, South Dakota,—a conservative Democrat, a moderate divisionist, and a gentleman who has never been identified in any manner with any of the factional fights in the Territory. . . .

LOUIS K. CHURCH,
JUDGE OF THE COURT OF
THE SUPREME COURT
JURORS

*Church, L. K.
Dakota
July 17 1887
C.S.L.*

Huron, Dakota, July 17 1887

Mr. President

As I was about leaving
Bismark on Thursday last I wrote you
in some haste, I did not intend to indicate
I thought an attempt might be made by
Democrats to delay my confirmation, but
that there was some reason for my thinking
such might be the case among the
Republican office holders & office seekers
the patronage is considerable, and as
the Legislature is limited to a session
of sixty days
most of the ap-
see how impor-
I am strongly
as organized &
member there
their votes elec-
expecting a pro-
that I should
The return

203

Church sent this letter to Cleveland assessing the political situation in Dakota Territory from Huron, the site of his court chambers.

Writing from the territorial capital, Church informed Cleveland about the appointments he had made during his first week as governor.

TERRITORY OF DAKOTA,
EXECUTIVE OFFICE.

LOUIS K. CHURCH,
Governor.

Bismarck, Feb'y 28th. 1887.

Mr. President:

Dear Sir:-

I qualified and entered upon my duties on the 17th inst. I have contemplated writing you for several days past, but the mass of business that had accumulated in the executive office was such, and the army of office-seekers has been so great, that my entire time has been consumed.

There are several matters that I would like to speak of, but, recognising the fact that your time is valuable, I will not undertake to speak at length regarding any particular matter, as, immediately on the close of the Legislature -- which will be on the 13th proximo -- I will come to Washington and make a full report of my stewardship.

During the period of time which elapsed between the acceptance of the resignation of Governor Pierce, and my qualification, Secretary Mc Cormack discharged the duties of the executive. There has been some comment

Winter 1996

239

I think I am justified in saying that my appointments give universal satisfaction to the better class of people of both parties, and that at least ninety per cent of the Democracy approve of my course. I consulted with the best men of our party throughout every section of the Territory, and I have the approval of the best and the leading citizens in pursuing the course that I have adopted. It is but natural that some should be dissatisfied. . . .

Very Respectfully,
L K Church

Bismarck, June 13th, 1887

Mr. President:

Dear Sir:-

I have contemplated writing you for several days past, but seeing by the newspapers that you were absent from Washington on a fishing trip, I concluded to wait until your return. I trust that you had an enjoyable trip. . . .

I have written you several letters in reference to [appointments to] land offices. . . . The Black Hills section of the country has had but very little attention either from the Federal or the Territorial administration. Its isolated position is such that in the distribution of the Territorial offices I was much embarrassed, but, fortunately, the leading men in that section of the country are not quite as ambitious for office as they are in the Eastern portion of Dakota. . . .

Day is in open hostility to your administration and my own, and is naturally sympathized with by such men as Ziebach.¹³ I think I am justified, however, in saying that

13. Francis M. Ziebach, a long-time newspaper editor and politician from southern Dakota Territory, was an early supporter of division and statehood. At this time, he was serving as receiver of the United States Land Office in Yankton. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 2: 1669; Doane Robinson, *South Dakota, Sui Generis, Stressing the Unique and Dramatic in South Dakota History*, 3 vols. (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1930), pp. 440-41.

my course is giving satisfaction to the people at large. I have endeavored to keep in my mind's eye the welfare of the Territory and the public service, regardless of the wish of faction or of a desire to please or displease any particular individual. Could I secure the appointment to some of these places before you take your summer vacation, I know it would help me materially, politically. As you will readily see upon a moment's reflection, I have accomplished but very little in the way of patronage from Washington since my inauguration as Governor in February last; and could the fact be known throughout the Territory that one or two prominent places had been secured by reason of my endorsement, you can readily see that it would have a tendency to solidify the sentiment of the Democrats and to impress them with the fact that you were in hearty sympathy with my movements here. If it is not too much, may I ask you to consider this matter, and if possible, to act in the premises. I do not want to importune you or to suggest or urge anything to you that would even for a moment cause you any annoyance. I realize every day more and more the embarrassments which surround me and the uncertainty of men whom I come in contact with. It does seem to me that the average politician in Dakota is something that was never known, heard or dreamed of in the East.

If you desire at any time to have me come to Washington, of course I will do so.

I contemplate removing to Bismarck early in July as I find that my duties are such that I can not discharge them with satisfaction to myself by dividing my time between Huron and Bismarck. The matter of expense is also a considerable item.

Yours Respectfully,
L K Church

Winter 1996

Letters of Louis K. Church 241

Bismarck, August 31st, [1887]

Mr. President:

Dear Sir:-

Yours of the 22nd inst. at hand, relating to Judge Francis, and contents noted.¹⁴

. . . . Your kind allusion to the fact that you are always pleased to hear of my official success leads me to think that peradventure some one may have been saying a kind word for me, and I will at least take advantage of that supposition to say to you that I have only one desire in the discharge of my official duties, and that is, to have the cleanest and the best administration of public affairs that Dakota has ever had, and I only trust that never, even in thought, will you have any occasion to regret honoring me as you have. The only thing that worries me is the fear of being misrepresented to you, and the thought that even for a moment you might some time think I was not what you thought I was; because I recognize the fact that I have antagonised certain men here in Dakota who would be only too glad to have it in their power to put me in a false position, but I have endeavored to cast my lines among the best elements of our party, and, while I am aware of the fact that I have not pleased all, and while I have been abused for not doing things that I knew I should not do, and would not do under any circumstances, and because I would not recommend certain parties for office I have laid myself open to being abused in certain quarters.

Respectfully,
L K Church

14. Church devoted most of this eleven-page letter to voicing his opinion on territorial supreme court judge W. H. Francis, whom Cleveland was considering removing from office. The governor referred to Francis as "nervous and impulsive" and "not of that character that fits a man for a judicial position." Cleveland eventually followed Church's suggestion that Francis be replaced by United States District Attorney John E. Carland of Bismarck.

Bismarck, Dec. 12th, 1887

Mr. President;
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:-

. . . . I want power to call a special Session of the Territorial Legislature so the proper legislation can be had in the premises.¹⁵ There is no provision of law that enables Dakota to have a special session of its Legislature. . . . I have prepared a bill including Dakota [and] I enclose a copy of the bill for your inspection, and approval. Will it be consistent with your ideas of propriety in this matter to hand the bill to some Senator [in Washington] for introduction or indicate some Senator that I can communicate with, and in case of its passage I will then ask you to grant permission for a special session of our legislature. . . . I fear the financial interests of the territory may suffer as we have interest on our territorial bonds to meet, to say nothing of other Government expenses. I consider this matter of the greatest importance and in strict harmony with the policy of my superiors at Washington in the matter not only of the land policy of the Interior Department but sound principles of good government in matters of taxation. . . .

You may remember our conversation regarding this matter, also regarding the matter of the Governor having the power to veto items in appropriation bills. A bill of this character would work great benefit in Dakota, and I have drawn such a bill.

May I beg as early an answer as your convenience will allow?

Very Truly,
L K Church

15. Church wanted a special session in order to clarify the meaning of an 1883 law to tax railroad property in the territory. He achieved neither this goal nor his request made at the end of this letter for legislation that would give territorial governors the power of the line-item veto for all bills dealing with appropriations.

Winter 1996

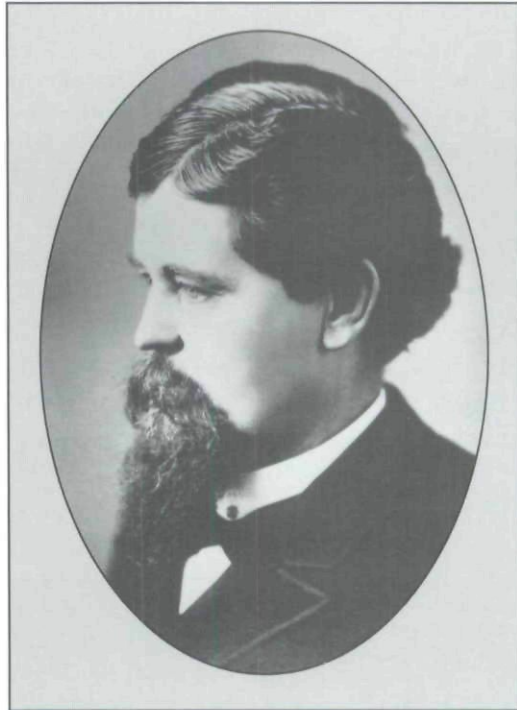
Letters of Louis K. Church 243

Bismarck, Feby. 11th, 1888

Mr. President:

It is with great hesit[a]ncy I set about writing you this letter, but I feel that the time is fast approaching when I will have occasion to meet in Dakota Politics an element that has been a curse to our party; this is nothing more or less than the Gang in our own party and who have acted with the Gang in the other; this is strong talk but true. If there has ever been Gang rule to perfection it has been right here in Dakota. Day and McCormack have con-

Church's loyalty to Cleveland fueled his power struggle with Merritt H. Day and territorial secretary Michael L. McCormack, pictured here. Both men had cast their political fortunes with future vice-president Adlai E. Stevenson.



trolled the Fourth Class Post Offices and do so yet.¹⁶ You intended these matters should come through me, but Mr. Stevenson although requested by Mr. Vilas in my presence to consult me about these matters, and at the same time showing him your kind and strong letter of indorsement and introduction of myself, has ignored that request.¹⁷ I wrote Mr. Vilas once about the matter but it has never been corrected, and I dropped the matter rather than appear to be annoying or presuming. Ever since you came into office Day has carried on a Brokerage business in offices, and up to the time of my appointment the Territory was filled with stories of different amounts he had received for his political services, and he certainly must have received considerable for he lived in style at Washington, and it is well known here he is without means. He and his friends are bold in telling certain men in office that he is all powerful in Fourth Class Post Office matters and will have them removed if they support my administration. [Secretary] McCormack is in sympathy with Day and not one bit better than he is, only he does not know half as much, he only knows what Day tells him and he has no personal following to any extent. This bold statement concerning McCormack need not worry you as far as our official duties are concerned, it is not necessary for me to have much to do with him, and I'll get along with him; I feel I am in honor bound on your account to do

16. Patronage in the United States Post Office was a source of bitter political conflict in the late 1800s. Postmasters exercised considerable political power as local party organizers and canvassers. With an office in nearly every village and town, the post office employed more than half of all government workers. Dorothy Ganfield Fowler, *The Cabinet Politician: The Postmasters General, 1829-1909* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), pp. 192, 196.

17. Adlai E. Stevenson, an Illinois lawyer and former congressman, was first assistant postmaster general from 1885 to 1889. William F. Vilas, a Wisconsin Democrat, served as postmaster general until the fall of 1887, when he became secretary of the interior. At Cleveland's direction, Stevenson replaced thousands of Republican postmasters with patronage-starved Democrats even though the administration had announced its dedication to civil service reform. Fowler, *The Cabinet Politician*, pp. 197, 199. In a 20 April 1888 *Washington Globe* article, Stevenson referred to the Dakota issue, denying any knowledge of McCormack's "being designated as referee." He continued, "There is no favoritism, as far as I am concerned, to any faction or part of faction."

Winter 1996

Letters of Louis K. Church 245

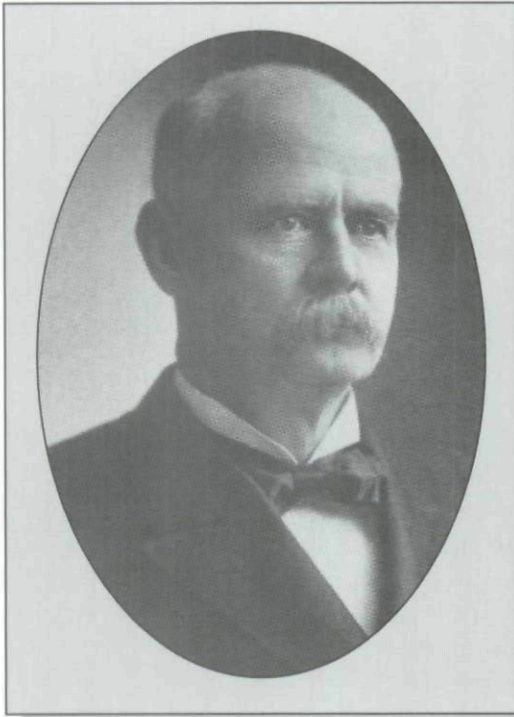
so. I regret he does not act as [i]f he was actuated by the same motives. Day has not only opposed you but abusively so. During the last few months seeing the course of public sentiment he quieted down and apparently took the other track. Now he is putting up jobs with McCormack in Washington to carry our [Dakota Democratic] Convention and elect Delegates to the next [Democratic] Nat'l Convention [at Saint Louis] opposed to you, and if possible give my prestige a black eye, and McCormack who is an uneducated illiterate man (I do him the justice of saying this, I do not believe he at present *intends to be used against you*) yet he is in thorough sympathy with Day and he certainly is not loyal to you when he does not honorably support your territorial Governor.

And how easy to secure Delegates weak kneed that can flop in a minute. Now Mr. President pardon this bold letter, pardon me when I say my administration is free from all entanglements, and not one act will reflect discredit on you or myself. I believe the people approve of my course, of course I cannot please all.

Now may I ask that Mr. Dickinson be requested to see I am backed up in my efforts here to aid good men in making their influence known and felt in the councils of our party.¹⁸ Let me have the patronage as you intended I should. . . . The people here are Cleveland supporters and I must have these delegates for you. I think our friends can control matters I am sure of it but it can be made easier. . . .

With best wishes I am,
Sincerely,
L. K. Church

18. Donald M. Dickinson, a Michigan lawyer and member of the Democratic National Committee, served as postmaster general from 1888 to 1889. While Dickinson and Stevenson probably consulted with Church on occasion, the governor did not always receive the consideration to which he thought he was entitled. The president, however, did not believe in delegating responsibility and played an important role in the appointment of postmasters. He examined the papers pertaining to each appointment and held regular conferences with his postmaster general. Fowler, *The Cabinet Politician*, pp. 196, 199-201.



As assistant postmaster general, Adlai Stevenson used the patronage power of his office to further his own political ambitions.

Bismarck, April 21st, 1888

Mr. President,
Executive Mansion,
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:-

I feel that it is necessary to call your attention to the fact Mr. Stevenson of the P.O. Dept. continues to send notices relating to Fourth Class Postmasters to Day and McCormack, and they are now receiving them and these notices are peddled about the Territory as indicating their influence at Washington. Now I have no desire to have control of these offices and intend to comply with your request to select a list of gentlemen from the Legislative Dis-

Winter 1996

Letters of Louis K. Church 247

tricts to whom such matters can be referred. Now Mr. President this man Day is not only abusive but the Republican press is aiding him all they can and I have been most foully libeled by Day in a paper called the Sioux City Journal. . . . I do not believe Mr. Dickinson is aware of these matters. This man Day is absolutely without character. He is going about the Territory carrying on a war of the character. . . . He talks Stevenson for Vice-President and brags of his power in the P.O. Dept.¹⁹. . . . Now I desire further to say my recommendations have received very little attention from Stevenson, and further when first introduced to Stevenson a year ago by Mr. Vilas, one of the first things he asked was that I aid his nephew a Mr. Brown to a Judgeship; I have not and perhaps this accounts for some of his hostility.

Things are going our way here and there is no act of mine that will not stand investigation. I have refused to submit to the "gang," and there comes the trouble. . . .

I regret to write you thus but there is a limit to everything and I feel under the circumstances justified in annoying you. . . .

Resply,
L K Church

Bismarck, April 23rd, 1888

Mr. President,
Executive Mansion,
Dear Sir:-

. . . . I am anxious to carry out your desires. . . . The truth of the matter is that every official Fourth Class Post-

19. Stevenson sought the Democratic vice-presidential nomination in 1888 but lost to Allen G. Thurman of Ohio. Stevenson served as vice-president of the United States from 1893 to 1897 during Cleveland's second administration. His grandson and namesake ran for president in 1952 and 1956.

masters and R.R. Postal Clerks that Mr. Day can influence (who think he aided in securing their appointment) is now actively at work to secure delegates friendly to Mr. Day to the Territorial Convention that selects delegates to [the] St. Louis [convention].

I assure you no man who has received my endorsement for [a] position from you, or any one who has ever received an appointment from myself as Governor can say I have ever directly or indirectly asked any promise or anything of any kind. I have kept in mind only one thing, *good men*. Yes I have written you such an appointment would help me, but Mr. President on my honor as a man I meant only that aid that would inure to my administration by reason of it being known I was for good men which means good government. I have no axe to grin[d] and I am not desirous of being a Boss. The Territorial press is largely Republican and they of course see the force of helping Day to make our friends all the trouble they can. You say you know of my fidelity to you;²⁰ I would not for anything be false to you or cause you any annoyance. . . . At the Democratic Convention at Aberdeen in 1886 when Day was nominated for Delegate to Congress, he stalked about with a large bundle of Fourth Class P.O. notices and used them for all they were worth,²¹ and will do it at the coming convention if allowed. I do not want control of these offices. But I know Day is doing and has been ever since I have been appointed Governor, by the lowest of methods, all he can to make my administration a failure. He told a Mr. Frye in Washington last summer that the old gang in North and South Dakota had put up a job to down me and make my administration odious. Mr. Frye told this to ex-Gov. Ordway and you can easily inquire of the Governor. Now Mr. President

20. Cleveland had written a supportive letter to Church on 18 April.

21. Day won the Democratic nomination but lost the 1886 delegate election to Republican Oscar S. Gifford, a Canton lawyer and former mayor.

Winter 1996

Letters of Louis K. Church 249

this man Day is odious to the best people of both parties, the best men in the Territory support me and Day's idea is simply this; he desires to control the Convention and claim it as a rebuke to me. He has boasted he would pass resolutions condem[n]ing my administration and thus rebuke you for my appointment. . . . Now Mr. President have I not as a citizen, if not as an official, a right to object to Day and McCormack having courtesies shown them by Mr. Stevenson when they are being built up thereby and the better enabled to harrass [sic] you in your selections for office simply because they cannot [exercise] control and [are] at the same time trying to destroy my usefulness as Governor. . . . Mr. President, I have been outrageously maligned, but I shall not worry you with those matters. I will ask for a leave of absence in a few days and will call and pay my respects, and your letter will give me an opportunity of talking freely, but I have always felt I should keep annoyances from you.

You have told me heretofore to always write you frankly. I have done so. I appreciate your many kindnesses, and regret exceedingly you should be for one moment annoyed.

Sincerely,
L K Church

Bismarck, August 2nd, 1888

Mr. President,
Washington, D.C.
Dear Sir:-

. . . I want to again thank you for your many manifestations of confidence, the success of my administration is now assured and to you belongs the credit.²²

22. Church wrote this upbeat letter after Day's attempt to seat his own delegates at the Democratic National Convention in Saint Louis had been thwarted. Cleveland had won renomination at the convention.

Not now, but after your second term and when I can pay my respects when [we] both are out of office I will relate my experience in Dakota. I have created antagonisms and you may have been annoyed, and the fact that you have has caused me more worry than all my other troubles and annoyances combined. . . .

Sincerely,
L K Church

Bismarck, D.T. Nov. 21st, 1888

Mr. President,
Washington, D.C.
Dear Sir:-

I am strongly urged by several gentlemen who I am confident are actuated by no improper motive to write you concerning contemplated political moves by our opponents here, and if successful will result in placing a class of men in power who have no care or regard beyond gratifying their own desires, and will undo everything we have been struggling for and will bring to the front an element that has been a curse to the Territory in the past, but whose influence has been largely destroyed during the last two years.

Your term as President expires March 4th.²³ The Territorial Legislature convenes January 8th. next and is limited to sixty days session, consequently the session of the Legislature will expire March 8th. or four days after your term. The job is to have me suspended by telegraph from President Harrison on the 5th. or 6th. or 7th. of March. . . . I shall not resign as we concluded when I last saw you, but I can be suspended or removed by telegraph. The

23. Cleveland lost the 1888 presidential election to Benjamin Harrison, an Indiana Republican, lawyer, and former United States senator.

plan contemplates refusal to act on important legislation and all appointments until after expiration of March 4th, when they expect to secure my removal as indicated.

Think of this condition of affairs and the great danger of vicious legislation and bad and vicious appointments and the borning of bad combinations that will last for years. When my removal is affected then McCormack as Secretary is to be directed by telegraph to act as Governor pending [a] new appointment and arrival of the new Governor's commission and he is to make appointments as directed by the combinations in return for which he will be continued at least for a while as Secretary, and the further gratification he will have of humiliating me. This man is not one bit too good for this work. . . . For months I have occupied the Executive Office conscious of the fact that the Secretary was scheming and working to disgrace me, and through me, consequently your administration. He has never forgiven you for appointing me Governor and ignoring Mr. Day and has never forgiven me for being Governor; when Day vilified me in his rump convention this Secretary . . . [gave] his approval to this outrageous assault upon the Governor.

He has been continually intriguing with some of the most unscrupulous men in the Territory. . . . I had written evidence with me at Washington proving beyond a doubt his character and actions but I concluded beyond showing you a letter not to annoy you, and I have that evidence now. I have during my entire term been harrassed [sic] and embarrassed by this man. He has been a spy on every move that could be made use of for misrepresentation of myself. . . . Now Mr. President believing as I do that he is to be made and willingly to be made an instrument to destroy the work of my administration and for my humiliation I now ask that he be removed and that a gentleman be appointed Secretary that will work in harmony with your administration and mine during the session of

the Legislature.²⁴ . . . I desire to be true to our people here who have aided me in my struggle for a good administration; beyond that I have no desire. You may on reading this letter think I am needlessly alarmed. I do not think so. I fully understand the men I am dealing with. . . .

Respectfully,
L K Church

Feb. 15, 1889

Mr. President,
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:-

. . . I informed you when in Washington [that] this man McCormack has conspired to undermine and destroy my usefulness as Governor and my reputation as a man. He has aided M. H. Day and others to embarrass the confirmation of your appointees by filing false and frivolous charges. I can prove all I say and you will remember I exhibited documentary proof to you when in Washington. He has used his office not only to annoy but embarrass the Territorial officials. He has threatened to withhold payment of Legislation printing unless the printer assailed me in his newspaper. . . .

I will not enter into detail on many many things and acts of this man. I have tried to do my duty as Governor and as a citizen. . . .

Respectfully,
L K Church

In March 1889, Church resigned the territorial governorship. He attended the inauguration of his successor, Arthur C. Mellette, a Republican who had been appointed by the Benjamin Harrison administration. After the cere-

24. Despite Church's request, McCormack remained in office through the end of the Church administration in March 1889.

monies, Church saluted his foes and walked away. He returned to Huron to practice law until 1890, when he relocated to Everett, Washington. There, he practiced law, served as president of the chamber of commerce, assisted in founding Everett General Hospital and the Everett Commercial Club, and helped to organize Trinity Church. In addition to his community service, Church chaired the Democratic State Convention in 1892. Five years later, he died while visiting Juneau, Alaska.

The departure of Church from the governor's office in 1889 signified the passing of the territorial system and the beginning of statehood for both Dakotas. Church served during a transitional period in which the duties of the governorship were difficult and diverse. His proficiency as a judge did not necessarily qualify Church to be governor. His vanity and vendettas both contributed to and grew out of the temper of the times. Years later, many of Church's antagonists attested to the governor's personal integrity and devotion to duty. Their stubborn opposition to his administration had reflected, to a certain extent, their aversion to federal authority in the territory.²⁵

Ultimately, Church emerged victorious from the brawl with his political opponents but not without serious damage to his credibility and future career. He was not incompetent or indecent, as Day and McCormack pictured him, and he certainly was not corrupt. On the other hand, neither Day nor McCormack deserved the condemnation they received at Church's hands. In both cases, ambitious and proud men became overly zealous, allowing personal vindictiveness to outweigh the public welfare. As a public figure, Church was an intriguing individual who sought to influence public opinion while maintaining control of the Democratic machinery in Dakota and loyally supporting Cleveland. Regrettably, he failed to transcend politics

25. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 220; Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, 2: 1476. General biographical information on Church appears in the *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, s.v. "Church, Louis Kossuth."

and escape the trap of polarizing issues. In a political era when patronage played such an important role, the governor's bitterness, pessimism, and sense of aggrievedness appeared to paralyze part of his effectiveness.

Copyright of South Dakota History is the property of South Dakota State Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

All illustrations in this issue are property of the South Dakota State Historical Society, State Archives Collection, except for those on the following pages: pp. 198, 217, from Robert Kolbe, Sioux Falls, S.Dak.; p. 203 (bottom), from The Sioux Falls Centennial (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.; Sioux Falls Centennial Inc., [1956]); p. 224 (inset), from Nancy Tystad Koupal, Pierre, S.Dak.; pp. 223, 238, 246, from Leonard Schlup, Akron, Ohio; p. 243, from State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, N.Dak.