

Kentucky's First Republican Governor

William O'Connell Bradley

By Patricia Owens, KFRW Americanism Chairman

Illustrations by Anne Steele





Kentucky's First Republican Governor, William O'Connell Bradley



Governor Bradley

Whenever possible in looking at historical events--- I like to highlight contributions our OWN KENTUCKY CITIZENS have made to our country.

As I was driving back home on Highway 27 from a meeting I had attended---a historical marker on the roadway near Lancaster, Kentucky caught my attention. It was honoring the 32nd Governor of Kentucky--- William O'Connell Bradley who was born near Lancaster in Garrard County, Kentucky. After further research---it was interesting to note--- that he was the FIRST REPUBLICAN--- to serve as Governor of Kentucky--- and Bradley became known--- as the father of the Republican Party in Kentucky.

As a Republican in a heavily Democratic state, Bradley found little success early in his political career. He suffered two defeats for a seat in the United States House of Representatives and also for the United States Senate.

Bradley's rise to prominence came--- in part--- due to his great oratory skills. **Bradley gave the speech seconding the Presidential nomination of Ulysses S. Grant at the 1880 Republican National Convention.** Seven years later Bradley was nominated for governor of Kentucky in 1887.



In accepting the 1887 nomination--- Bradley implored Kentuckians to realize that the Civil War was over--- and to discontinue their practice of electing ex-Confederate Democrats to public office. His platform included proposals for education, implementation of a high protective tariff, and developing the state's resources. He was also critical of excessive spending during the preceding Democratic administrations.

Although Bradley was a decidedly superior orator---his opponent---Democrat Simon Buckner--- a former Confederate general--- relied on party strength and personal popularity to give him an advantage over the Republican Bradley---and ultimately--- Bradley lost that election.



Kentucky's First Republican Governor, William O'Connell Bradley



Bradley was again nominated for governor of Kentucky in 1895. The major issue of THIS campaign was whether the country should maintain a monetary system based on the gold standard--- or allow the coinage of silver at a ratio of 16 to 1--- commonly called the **Free Silver position**.

At their convention--- the Republicans adopted a platform that was very much in favor of the gold standard. The Democrats were divided on the monetary issue and were also hurt by economic problems. Consequently---capitalizing on divisions in the Democratic Party---Bradley won the general election---and became the first Republican governor of Kentucky in 1895.

During his term, Republicans controlled the Kentucky House of Representatives, while Democrats controlled the Kentucky Senate. This led to infighting between the two houses. And even though 75 bills were filed---because of the infighting---there were few accomplishments during Bradley's first session.

However---during his term---Bradley did

MUCH to advance the cause of blacks in Kentucky. He denounced racially motivated lynching and demanded that county officials prosecute racial violence. He called a special legislative session in March 1897 to consider an anti-lynching bill---and despite the politically divided legislature---the bill quickly passed. During Bradley's four-year term---25 lynchings were committed in the state---down from 56---during the term of his predecessor.

William Bradley served as Kentucky's 32nd governor from December 10, 1895 to December 12, 1899.

Despite being a member of the state's minority party, Bradley was later elected to the U.S. Senate in 1907. Again---divisions within the Democratic Party played a role in his election---as Bradley's opposition to prohibition--- made him more palatable to some Democrats---more so than their own candidate.

On May, 14, 1914---just before the end of his term--- Bradley announced his intent to retire from politics upon the completion of his term as U.S. Senator--- owing to the decline of his general health.

Hurrying to board a streetcar following his announcement---Bradley suffered a serious fall, sustaining two broken fingers, head trauma, and internal injuries. After briefly attempting to return to his duties, he became bedfast and died 9 days later--- on May 23, 1914--- before completing his term.

Upon Bradley's death, both houses of



Kentucky's First Republican Governor, William O'Connell Bradley

Congress passed resolutions expressing their sympathy, and promptly adjourned out of respect.

His body was returned to Frankfort for burial, but in accordance with the wishes of Bradley and his family---his body DID NOT lie in state.

William O'Connell Bradley---Kentucky's 32nd governor---and Kentucky's first REPUBLICAN Governor---the father of the Republican Party of Kentucky---was buried --in the state cemetery--- in Frankfort, Kentucky.



Original Kentucky Governor's Mansion

In an address to the legislature, Bradley mentioned the need to repair the Governor's mansion in Frankfort. The floors were being propped up and holes were being filled with hundreds of yards of weather stripping during the winter. On February 10, 1899, the Governor's Mansion caught fire due to a faulty flu in the Governor's bedroom. As result the governor had to reside in a hotel until the end of his term.



When "Billy O" left office in 1899, he served briefly as the political advisor to William S. Taylor who ran for governor against William Goebel. Taylor was inaugurated as Kentucky Governor but after the assassination of Goebel was force to flee Kentucky. He represented Taylor and the Republicans in Federal Court in the lawsuit which unseated Taylor from the governor's office.

Billy "O" moved to Louisville to practice law but remained active in Republican politics. He seconded the nomination of Theodore Roosevelt at the Republican Convention of 1904.