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CHARLES ROBINSON

Lawrence (Republican), 9 February 1861–12 January 1863

Born 21 July 1818, Hardwick (Worcester County), Massachusetts; son of Jonathan Robinson, a farmer, and Huldah Woodward Robinson, 5 brothers and 4 sisters; educated at Hadley Academy, Amherst Academy, and Berkshire Medical School (graduated 1843); married (1) Sarah Adams, 1843 (died 17 January 1846), 2 children dying in infancy, (2) Sarah Tappan Doolittle Lawrence, 30 October 1851, no children; religious preference Universalist but member of no church; died 17 August 1894, of chronic bladder and stomach trouble, at his home Oakridge near Lawrence; buried Oak Hill Cemetery, Lawrence.

Following the admission of Kansas as a state on 29 January 1861, Charles Robinson was sworn in as governor on 9 February 1861. Robinson’s message to the first state legislature provided his personal interpretation of the territorial history of Kansas, in which he had been an active and decisive participant.

In 1849, after teaching school and practicing medicine in Massachusetts, Robinson had joined an overland caravan to the California gold mines. His cross-country route portentously passed through Kansas, including the future townsite of Lawrence. In California, Robinson settled in Sacramento where he became a leader of the
squatter association. He was wounded in a squatter battle, and he won election to the California house of representatives for the 1850–51 term. He returned to Massachusetts, where he edited the *Fitchburg News* from 1851 to 1854.

During late 1853 and early 1854, northern abolitionists became alarmed by the discussion of an eventual passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Inspired by Massachusetts industrialist Eli Thayer’s crusade for a free state of Kansas, Robinson came to Kansas Territory in July 1854 at the head of the first colony sent out by the Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Company. By September he had located the company headquarters in Lawrence, his home for the remainder of his long life. In Kansas Robinson was always known as “Doctor,” but in reality he was a nonpracticing physician; he made his livelihood first as the agent of the emigrant company, later as a farmer (on his 1,600-acre farm just north of Lawrence), and finally as a real estate promoter. His cool, detached leadership provided a stabilizing influence for the Free-State party. A delegate to the Topeka constitutional convention in 1855, Robinson was elected governor for its active but illegal government. While traveling in Missouri, Robinson was arrested for professing to be the governor of Kansas territory; he was jailed and subsequently freed by antislave partisans. He later helped organize the Republican party. As that party’s first candidate for governor, he opposed Democratic candidate Samuel Medary, the last territorial governor. Supporters of Medary sought to convince voters that the Republicans were abolitionists of the John Brown variety, while Republicans identified the Democrats as successors of the border ruffian mobs. In the election of 6 December 1859, Robinson won 7,848 votes to 5,401.\(^{43}\)

When Robinson first spoke to the state legislature in 1861, he acknowledged the unprecedented drouth of the past year, which affected many trans-Mississippi areas. But his primary concern at that time was the threat secession had brought to an enduring federal union of all of the states. Contrary to his hope “that this issue will be withdrawn, and the nation advance in its career of prosperity and power, the just pride of every citizen and the envy of the world,” civil war between the Union and the Confederacy erupted before three months of his term had passed.
Free staters had rejected Lecompton, the last territorial capital, as the state capital and Topeka was designated the new temporary site, with voters approving it as a permanent capital on 15 November 1861. At this time, both the governor’s office and the senate were located in a rented downtown building at Sixth and Kansas Avenue called Museum Hall, while the house of representatives was convened in the Congregational Church. Robinson lived at the Tefft House, located at Seventh and Kansas Avenue, while he was governor.

The new state had a sizable debt, no money in its treasury, and immense problems due to the outbreak of the Civil War. As a Union war governor, Robinson was responsible for recruiting troops for federal service, but throughout the war the number of Kansas volunteers far surpassed the quotas assigned to the state. Despite these pressures, Robinson’s executive decisions were usually sound: His administration set important precedents for Kansas, created state agencies and a state agricultural society, established the earliest state institutions, and organized the judicial system.

However, a primary obstacle to Governor Robinson was his ongoing feud with Sen. James H. Lane for control of the Republican party. In fact, Robinson had delayed convening the legislature after his swearing-in until 26 March 1861, in an attempt to reduce the influence of his powerful rival. Late in 1861, Lane promoted the idea of a gubernatorial election held at the same time as fall congressional elections; despite the fact that Robinson had just assumed office in 1861, he claimed that Robinson’s term was expiring because he had been elected two years earlier. Robinson in turn appointed a replacement for Lane in the Senate on the assumption that the senator had resigned when he accepted a commission as general in the Union army. Lane retaliated by instigating impeachment proceedings against Robinson and two other state executives for selling Kansas bonds below rates established by the legislature. The other state officers were convicted on one of the charges and removed from office, while Robinson was acquitted of all charges. Robinson believed that the convicted officials were victims of an attack directed at him, so as compensation he appointed them as junior officers in Kansas regiments: Neither survived the war.
Even though he was vindicated, the impeachment trial came so close to the meeting of the Republican state convention on 17 September 1862 that Robinson failed to gain renomination. He had many supporters, but he was never popular with the voters. Supporters of Jim Lane drove Robinson from the Republican party, and in later years he was a political maverick. He was a strong believer in temperance but he did not favor prohibition. He backed most other reforms that stirred Kansas voters in that era, such as women’s suffrage, blacks’ rights, antimonopoly action, and financial reform. Perhaps he might have had more influence had he remained in the Republican party, but his political loyalty in 1862 was for the Union party ticket that was backed by anti-Lane Republicans and Democrats. Robinson served eight years as state senator, beginning in 1873, elected either as an Independent, Independent Reform, or Independent Greenback candidate. He did not garner the nomination for governor in the Independent Reform convention of 1874, but as a National Labor Greenback party candidate for governor in 1882, he won 20,933 votes out of 179,379 cast. His participation in this election helped divide the vote, enabling George Washington Glick, the first Democratic governor of Kansas, to be elected. Robinson ran unsuccessfully as a Democrat for the state senate in 1884, for Congress in 1886, and for governor in 1890 (when he came in third, receiving 71,357 votes out of 296,560 cast). In the 1890 race, Robinson’s support for fusion between the Farmers Alliance and Democrats may have influenced such joint ventures in later elections.

Following his term as governor, Robinson lived out his years in Lawrence. For two years in the early 1870s, Robinson served on the board of directors of the Quindaro State Normal School, an institution for blacks near Kansas City. He was almost seventy years old when Pres. Grover Cleveland appointed him superintendent of Haskell Indian Institute on 1 January 1887. During the two years he held that position, the number of students at Haskell more than doubled. He was also president of the Kansas State Historical Society. His service as a regent for the University of Kansas totaled twelve years, and in recognition, he received an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from the University of Kansas in 1887. Robinson, in Brown County, was named for him.
In 1879 at the quartercentennial celebration of the creation of the Kansas territory, Robinson still echoed his moderate and reasonable demeanor when he recalled the “Bleeding Kansas” era: “The old contentions, bitterness, and irrepressible conflict between the North and South have given place to mutual respect, love and good-will. The United States now constitute, in reality as well as in name, like institutions, like aspirations and a common destiny.”

REFERENCES: Blackmar, 1902; Carlin and Richmond, 1982; Castel, 1958; Crawford, 1911; Robinson, 1898; Wilson, 1975.