THOMAS CARNEY

Leavenworth (Republican), 12 January 1863–9 January 1865

Born 20 August 1824, near Tipton (Delaware County), Ohio; son of James Carney, a farmer, and Sarah Carney, 3 brothers, 1 half brother, and 2 half sisters; educated in nearby Berkshire; married Rebecca Ann Camaday, 13 November 1851, 5 sons; religious preference Presbyterian but member of no church; died 28 July 1888, in Leavenworth, from apoplexy; buried in Mount Muncie Cemetery, Leavenworth.

On the evening of 12 January 1862, Thomas Carney took the oath of office as governor of Kansas from a Topeka newspaper editor, who also happened to be a notary public. When he assumed office, Carney was reputedly the wealthiest man in Kansas. His successful business in Leavenworth was the source of his prosperity, but his administration was dominated by the effects of the Civil War.

Carney had gained his early business experience in Ohio as a hauler of freight. He also had trained for many years in the dry-goods wholesale business in Cincinnati before he moved to Leavenworth in 1858. There he established the first exclusively wholesale concern in the territory, selling groceries and shoes. His business, Thomas Carney and Company, prospered. His political career began with his election as a Republican to the first state house of representatives during 1861–62. He was nominated for governor
by the Republican state convention because he was regarded as a
supporter of Jim Lane. Carney won election on 4 November 1862
over Union party candidate W. R. Wagstaff, 9,990 votes to 5,456.
Wagstaff was backed by Democrats and anti-Lane Republicans.

As governor, Carney sought every means to improve the financial
health of the state. He journeyed to New York City to sell state
bonds, and he pledged his personal wealth as collateral for repay­
ment. He ordered recruitment of the last six regiments organized
for Civil War duty. He personally paid the expenses of having 150
men patrol the Kansas-Missouri border (which totaled $10,000),
but he unfortunately disbanded this force three days before William
Quantrill’s infamous raid on Lawrence. Carney donated $1,000 of
his own money to Lawrence to help the survivors of Quantrill’s
massacre. When Maj. Gen. Sterling Price’s Confederate force
pushed west from central Missouri in October 1864, Carney called
out the 12,622-man militia. By that time it was obvious that Carney
would not have a second term. He had permitted an anti-Lane fac­
tion in the Kansas legislature to elect him United States senator in
February 1864 in an election called illegally since Lane’s seat would
not be vacant until 4 March 1865.

Carney’s administration was a stormy one, but he laid the basis for
financial solvency for the state. State institutions were created in
Manhattan, Emporia, Osawatomie, Leavenworth, and Lawrence
during his term, and he made substantial gifts to some of them.
Newspapers commented favorably on his ninety-minute speeches as
governor, and those speeches published show the self-educated Car­
ey as a polished orator. During his last year as governor (after 10
December 1863), Carney’s office was located in temporary quarters
in a leased brick building on Kansas Avenue in Topeka, which
served as the capitol.

In subsequent years Carney continued his wholesale business,
while serving as mayor of Leavenworth (1865–66), as director of the
Lawrence and Fort Gibson Railway, and as an organizer and presi­
dent of the first national bank in Kansas, the First National Bank of
Leavenworth. During financial crises of the 1870s, he suffered busi­
ness reversals. The Dodge City Times reported on 24 March 1877 that
Carney was in Dodge City buying buffalo hides and bones. He had
gotten into a poker game, and believing that he had an unbeatable hand, he put everything into the pot and lost. The newspaper commented that “the next eastward bound freight train carried an old man, without shirt studs or other ornament, apparently bowed down by overwhelming grief, and the conductor hadn’t the heart to throw him overboard.” Nevertheless, by the time of his death in 1888, he possessed much property in Leavenworth.

REFERENCES: Blackmar, 1902; Carlin and Richmond, 1982; Castel, 1958; Connelley, 1918; Crawford, 1911; Miller and Snell, 1963; Plummer, 1971.