Kansas Governors

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In 1878, the Republican state convention gave John P. St. John the nomination for governor over the incumbent George T. Anthony and rival John A. Martin. He defeated the Democratic candidate John R. Goodin by 74,020 votes to 37,208, with the Greenback candidate D. P. Mitchell receiving 27,068 votes. St. John was the first governor to have formal inauguration ceremonies. Held on the steps of the newly completed east wing of the State Capitol, it was described in the nationally distributed *Harper's Weekly*. St. John’s official residence was at the Tefft House at Seventh and Kansas Avenue. In 1880, in his second race, St. John defeated United States
Sen. Edmund G. Ross—a former Republican now running as a Democrat—115,204 votes to 63,557. Three minor party candidates polled 20,183 votes in that election.

In 1847 John St. John’s family moved from Indiana to Illinois. St. John married his first wife there in 1852, but three months after the wedding, he hastily departed without his wife for California. There he mined, cut wood, worked in a store, worked on a steamboat, fought against Indians (when he was twice wounded), and began the study of law. After traveling to Mexico, Central and South America, and Hawaii, he returned to Illinois around 1859 and was admitted to the Illinois bar in 1860. After service in the Civil War, St. John moved to Independence, Missouri, and then in 1869 to Olathe, Kansas. As a Republican he was elected to the state senate in 1872 from Johnson County but declined renomination four years later. He also refused the Prohibition party’s nomination for governor in 1876.

A major development in St. John’s first term was the legislative initiative to place a constitutional amendment for prohibition before the voters in 1880. With strong support from the governor, constitutional prohibition was approved, and the legislature wrote an enforcement law. As an ardent prohibitionist, St. John started the first of many gubernatorial “water banquets,” where no beverage stronger than water was served. Governor St. John was the official host for the visit of Pres. Rutherford B. Hayes, for whom a water banquet was appropriate. However, it was less appreciated by the non teetotaler former president, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, during his visit.

Two other important issues faced St. John as governor. Kansans near the southern border feared another Indian uprising in their area, and they voiced their frustrations in letters to the governor. A mounted guard was created to protect settlers along that boundary. A second crisis stemmed from the fact that Kansas had become the “promised land” for thousands of blacks emigrating from southern states. St. John organized assistance for these “Exodusters,” many of whom came to Kansas without resources. On a different front, St. John opened a coal mine at the penitentiary in Lansing to provide jobs for the prisoners, due to a dominant belief of the era that such institutions should be self-supporting.
In 1882 Governor St. John controlled 80 percent of the delegates in the Republican state convention, enabling him to receive an unprecedented nomination for a third term. However, he was defeated by Democrat George Washington Glick, 83,237 votes to 75,158. Of significance in this election was the candidacy of Charles Robinson, the first governor of Kansas, on the National or Greenback-Labor ticket; he received 20,933 votes. The campaign issues were the third-term issue and St. John's ardent support for both prohibition and women's suffrage. The sizable third party vote and a belief that St. John was in league with the railroads led to his defeat in the election and virtually forced him out of the Republican party.

St. John's fervor for prohibition had brought him many backers and many antagonists. In fact, the first town named for him had a name change within fourteen months, and the county with his name was redesignated by the legislature after he was out of office.
However, St. John, seat of Stafford County, still commemorates him.

The Prohibition party nominated St. John for president in 1884, and he attracted much attention in his campaign, receiving fifteen times more votes than previous Prohibition candidates. The votes he received in New York alone were decisive, for he probably reduced the Republican tally and thereby cost James G. Blaine the state—and the presidency, making Grover Cleveland the first Democratic president since the Civil War.

The loss of the election did not dampen St. John’s enthusiasm for prohibition; he traveled more than 350,000 miles and made 4,500 speeches in support of it. Reform-minded, he also backed free silver, direct election of United States senators, women’s suffrage, and government ownership of railroads. He severed his Prohibition party connections in 1896 and rallied to the Democratic candidacy of William Jennings Bryan in 1900. St. John remained active until the summer of his death in 1916.

REFERENCES: Bader, 1986; Carlin and Richmond, 1982; Davis, 1976; Frederickson, 1930; Pickett, 1968.