

Inaugural Address of Governor George W. Atkinson

Delivered March 4, 1897

FELLOW CITIZENS OF WEST VIRGINIA:

To the political party to which I have the honor to belong, and I trust to all the people of the State, this is an auspicious occasion. For twenty-six years the Democratic party has had exclusive control of our State Government. In a Republic it is not best that any political party should be kept in power too long. I do not mean to convey the idea that continued power necessarily bring about dishonesty in the management of public affairs; but I do mean to say that any party, when too long in authority, necessarily becomes opinionated, and drops into ruts from which it cannot easily extricate itself. To get into the habit of thinking only in one particular channel, in acting one way, and doing everything in the selfsame manner, is disastrous to any individual, or class of individuals, and to a Government - State or National - as well. A Government is simply an aggregation of individuals, and whatever affects an individual citizen affects the Government in the same manner and in the same degree. Running in grooves will stunt, fossilize and necessarily render any individual lopsided. The same is true of any organized body of men, and of a State also. A lopsided, one-ideaed man is by no means an ideal citizen, even if he is not dangerous to the public weal; and the same is true of a lopsided political party. Hence, I say - and I do not desire to be considered as reflecting upon our Democratic friends, who, for more than a quarter of a century, have had exclusive control of our State Government - that it is far better for all of our people, as well as infinitely better for the State itself, that we have, politically speaking, after this long lapse of years, "hung our gate on the other post." I am sure that we will lose nothing, and I trust that all of us, both Republicans and Democrats, will profit by the change.

In West Virginia we have the elements of a great State. Her natural advantages are perhaps superior to those of any other State in the Union. It behooves us, therefore, as good citizens, without regard to our political creeds or party affiliations or predilections, to do everything in our power to forward her interests, and to encourage her development, that we may enable her to reach the place that a beneficent Providence intended her to occupy, - the forefront of the great States of the American Republic. It shall be my purpose in this patriotic work, to use my utmost endeavors to bring her vast resources to the attention of men of enterprise and wealth in the other States of the Union, and to do everything in my power to encourage her development, and thus advance the interests of all our people.

To me, personally, my fellow citizens, this is a great occasion, and one, I trust, I most thoroughly and fully appreciate. To be selected, without opposition, by the great political organization to which I have always had the honor to belong, to the first place within the gift of the citizens of my native State, and to be elected by a majority considerably in excess of that given to the Chief Magistrate of the Nation, who is also of my own political faith, and whose name was on the same ticket with my own, are compliments and honors which any one should most fully appreciate. I am, therefore, profoundly grateful to my fellow citizens for the high honors they have so cheerfully and willingly conferred upon me.

Born and reared upon the sacred soil of your State, my interests are yours, and your wishes shall be mine. My utmost endeavors, I promise you, shall be exerted to administer our laws carefully, thoughtfully, fairly, impartially. I am a Republican, and everybody in West Virginia knows it, but as your Governor, your chief executive officer, I shall be absolutely impartial in the enforcement of the law.

In the distribution of patronage, I shall serve my party first; but in the execution of the trusts placed in my keeping by the people of my State, I shall know no party, class, race, or creed. My intention, therefore, is to be fair and just and impartial in the execution of the laws of the prosperous Commonwealth of West Virginia. In all public business transactions, therefore, a Democrat will be as welcome at the State House as a Republican.

I desire here and now to assure my friends of all political parties, that it shall be my aim and purpose to require an honest and economical administration of all of our public institutions. I have selected for Directors and Regents of these various institutions, the very best men within the limits of our Commonwealth. No Board appointed by me shall be without minority representation, whether the law requires it or not. With humiliation I have seen more than one of our great State Institutions crippled and handicapped by partisan manipulations. I have seen our University, which ought to be greater than it is, wholly under the control of one political party for almost a generation. It pained me as a citizen to see it many times grossly mismanaged and cramped and hampered in the great work it was designed, by the law, that it should do for our people. For a score or more of years not a representative of the minority party was allowed upon its Board of Regents. This was wrong - forever wrong. That condition will never occur again. If the law did not require it, I would give the minority party fair representation on the Board of Management of its affairs.

Above all other things, politics should not be allowed to enter into our educational institutions. Under my administration, there will be no politics in our schools, from the infant department to the University, if my wishes are consulted. The people may depend on this. If I can prevent it, no teacher will be dismissed, if he is competent, because he is a Democrat, nor will one be employed simply because he is a Republican. The age in which we live is too enlightened to allow anything like this to be done. Because our educational work has been prostituted to political purposes in the past, is no reason why it should be done in the future. It will not be done, if it is in my power to prevent it, and I do not arrogate too much to myself to say that I believe it is in my power to stop it, should it ever be attempted.

Since the State University was placed under non-partisan control two years ago, it has almost doubled in its attendance of students, and in its usefulness in educational work. Its curriculum is equal to any like school in the West or South. It shall be my purpose to do everything in my power to double its growth and usefulness during my administration. It is not claiming too much to say that this can be done. It is not arrogating too much to say that it will be done. Competency and efficiency will be the only requirements for its faculty. The question will not be asked as was the custom in a large part of the past quarter of a century, "does the applicant with systematic regularity vote the Democratic ticket?" I do not disparage men from voting the Republican ticket, but that will not avail them anything when they apply for a situation in our schools, unless they

are otherwise educationally qualified for the positions they seek. These pledges, my fellow citizens, I will faithfully carry out.

Much stress was placed upon corporations by our Democratic friends during the last campaign. Upon this question my views were expressed freely and without reserve all over the State. I never could see any good reason why an incorporated body of men should be prosecuted or persecuted simply for the reason that it is a corporation. I am not now, nor was I ever an attorney for any corporation; but I have always sought to be fair with all individual citizens and all incorporated bodies as well. I have invariably opposed trusts, and I always shall; but when a number of men form themselves into a corporate body for proper business purposes, I never felt it to be my duty to throw obstacles in the way of their success. On the contrary, I have invariably deemed it to be my duty to aid them in all proper undertakings. West Virginia can never be developed without the encouragement of all such movements and enterprises as these. It is a mistake to create prejudice against men who organize for legitimate purposes and pursuits. Instead of fewer corporations in West Virginia, we need more of them. Instead of crushing out those we already have, it is our duty to invite others to come among us to aid us in the development of our almost inexhaustible natural resources. It shall be my unswerving aim to be fair and just towards all individuals and corporations who may come to West Virginia during the next four years, to cast their lots with us, and become citizens of our growing and prosperous Commonwealth. I will therefore take no stock now or ever in the nonsensical cry of "down with the rich men and corporations." Such talk is anarchy, and anarchy will never secure an enduring foothold in our "Switzerland of America." The anarchists have said that they will blow us up. We will blow them up. Our civilization is too far advanced for our people to tolerate such a sentiment in West Virginia as that. Do not misunderstand me. I am not willing to surrender either our rights or our territory to trusts or monopolies. On the contrary, I promise carefully to guard the interests and the property of our people against the encroachments of monopolies and trusts. No trust owns me. Neither do the anarchists. I am wholly divorced from both of them, and always expect to be, and always intend to be.

I shall require from our State Boards careful, economical and honest administration. I have chosen, as I have already said, the very best men in the Commonwealth as members of these Boards, and I have not sought to dominate them in the appointment of subordinate officials. As far as in my power lies to prevent, there shall be no mismanagement of any of these institutions, or misappropriation of the public funds of the State.

My observations in the past teach me that honest men will perform their public duties faithfully. For all these Boards I have selected men of the highest character and of established business qualifications, and I shall expect at their hands faithful administrations of these public trusts. In this connection I desire to pay proper tribute to my immediate predecessor, who, in my judgment, has done his very best to place our State institutions on a higher plane than that of spoils.

I have in mind a number of suggestions as to needed amendments of our laws relative to our State institutions, which I will embody in my first message to the Legislature.

One of these suggestions is the establishment of a curriculum in our present so-called Normal School at Huntington. We have no real Normal School in our State. We ought to have one. Our laws contemplate such a school, but unfortunately we have none. We should have one distinctive school of pedagogy. A Normal School contemplates the education of teachers and nothing but teachers. By all means we should have one such school in West Virginia. Our so-called Normal Schools are only academies. We need, above everything else, a real Normal School for the training only of teachers. I hope to see the day when we shall have such a school in our State. We can have it. We must have it. We will have it. It may not be established during my administration, but in the fullness of time it will come.

Another of these suggestions is the broadening of the scope of our State University. Its plan of work is not in accord, in many respects, with what it should be. to enable it to do the best possible work in educating the young men and women of our State. There is a higher and broader field for it to occupy, which it has not hitherto included within the scope of its possibilities.

Another of these suggestions is a regular and authorized officer under the law, a chaplain to the State prison at Moundsville. In my judgment, it is a blot on West Virginia's good name that she has no one duly authorized to give his undivided time to the moral and spiritual natures of the men confined in that institution. These criminals are entitled, to our careful consideration. We are derelict, if we fail to do anything and everything in our power to reform and regenerate these unfortunates.

Another of these suggestions is an exact geological survey of our State. Such survey is the only means of giving to us a thorough knowledge of our great natural resources, which will enable us to prove authoritatively all that we claim for West Virginia.

Another of these suggestions is the complete equipment of an Immigration Bureau, by which alone we can, by the authority of the State, present all of our natural advantages to those who are seeking homes, and who might come among us and cast their lots with us, if we can hold out proper inducements to encourage them to come.

Still another of these suggestions is, whether it is wise to maintain the Irreducible School Fund, with a view of providing for the general educating of the children of the future, or whether this fund, already accumulated, shall be used, by proper distribution, for the education of the children of the present generation.

I am unalterably and forever opposed to everything like sectionalism. I am a Virginian, but at the same time, I am an American. In my estimation, the Nation is greater than a State. I stand for the United States first, and for West Virginia next. I yield to none greater admiration for my native State; but with me it is always the United States first, and West Virginia secondly. The whole is greater than a part. The General Government is bigger than any one of its constituent parts. I trust I shall always be big enough and broad enough to see beyond the integral to the whole.

I am sincere, my fellow citizens, when I say that I believe West Virginia is entering upon a new era of unparalleled prosperity. With seventeen thousand square miles of the best coal territory on the face of the earth; with oil and gas deposits thus far unequalled; with forests superior to those

of any of our sister commonwealths; with a climate which cannot be excelled; with scenery for beauty and grandeur unsurpassed; with a school system as good as the best; with courts fearless in the enforcement of the law; with Churches full abreast of the times; with as noble a class of natives as any on which the sun has ever shone; and with railroads building in, through and across our borders; with all of these advantages, why may I not conclude that there is a great future before us as a people and a State?

From our developing resources, we may look for money enough for all our needs, and with which we may be able to lift all of our public institutions to a higher plane of usefulness.

West Virginia has not always had a big treasure chest overrunning with gold, but as her resources increase it would be folly for her to be contented with the methods that were absolutely necessary in the past. Internal improvements, well patronized and subsidized schools, carefully provided and thoroughly equipped penal and charitable institutions, good roads, bridges, and all things of that sort, not only add to the comfort and incite to the development of a State, but they pay for themselves every day in the conveniences they afford. The Mountain State started out in life with little heritage but boundless loyalty and broad acres. She is making progress as fast as she can, with the assurance that every year will be better than the last.

My fellow citizens, appreciating fully the responsibilities you have placed upon me by your suffrages, and asking from one and all your aid and your sympathies to enable me to discharge my public duties faithfully and well: and invoking the Divine blessing upon all of us in our public and private relations, I am now ready to take upon myself the oath of office, and assume the responsibilities and burdens as the Chief Executive of our State.