

John Gosper, Arizona's Would-be Governor

By Jay W. Eby

John Jay Gosper is described by historian J. S. Goff as "one of the most colorful and flamboyant of the territorial officials" of Arizona.¹ As Territorial Secretary during the Hoyt and Fremont administrations he was also a very frustrated official because of the two governors' frequent and protracted absences.

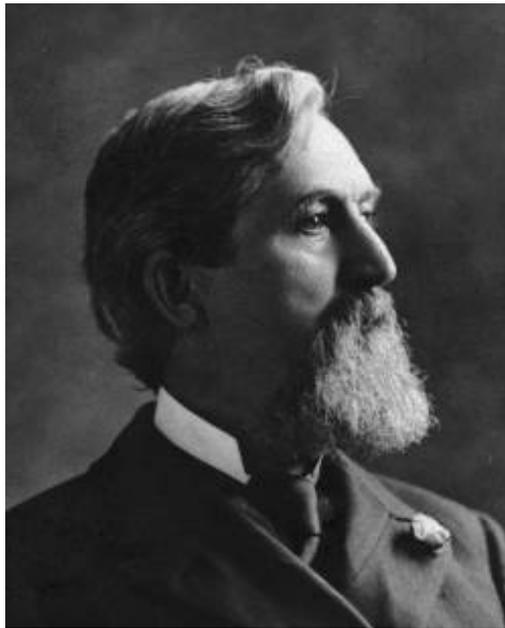
During those absences Gosper was acting governor and it was he, not the absent governor, who welcomed President Rutherford

Secretary for nearly five years, during which time he was acting governor three-fourths of the time."²

B. Hayes on his official visit to Arizona in 1880, boarding the President's train at Maricopa. In an official report that he was required to submit to the Secretary of the Interior, Gosper suggested that Fremont either be required to return to Arizona or resign as governor.

Gosper added to his efforts to be named Arizona's governor in a letter he wrote to President James A. Garfield on March 17, 1881. It suggested that he be appointed governor in place of the often-absent Fremont. Gosper complained he was performing the responsibilities of Governor Fremont more than half the time because the governor was gone from Arizona so much. Aware of President Garfield's record as a volunteer Union War Veteran who rose to the rank of major general, he added the information, "I was a volunteer in the Union Service, and left a sacrifice upon the battlefield, my left leg, and am now using a wooden one as a substitute."

At a later point, Gosper wrote to President Chester A. Arthur requesting the governor's position, complaining that "he had been



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That John Gosper very much wanted the position was highly evident, but it was not to be. When the time came to replace Fremont, President Arthur picked Frederick A. Tritle instead. Gosper would only have the consolation prize of the "Acting Governor" title between Fremont's resignation and the arrival four months later of the new territorial officers, including a new Territorial Secretary.

Gosper's Early Years

John Jay Gosper was born on April 8, 1841, Knox County, Ohio, to Nathan P. Gosper and Adelia E. Freer.³ In 1841 the family moved to a farm near Geneva, Kane County, Illinois where his father died in 1850 leaving Sarah and five children. Each of the children was apprenticed to families in the community. John at age 11 was apprenticed to a farmer who mistreated him. John ran away but the sheriff brought him back. He was supposed to work for the farmer until he was eighteen but left early to join the Union Army.

He enlisted in the 8th Illinois Cavalry in the fall of 1861, fought in 30 battles for the Union and

was commissioned as Quartermaster for the 26th Colored Infantry Volunteers organized in Chicago. He was involved in the battle of Petersburg and at the siege of Richmond lost his left leg. He is often referred to as Colonel Gosper which may have been his rank as an officer in the Grand Army of the Republic.

For two years he was the elected tax collector for Geneva Township in Kane County, Illinois, where he operated the Dean and Gosper Dry Goods Store which employed his wife, mother, brother and sister. John at 25 married his nurse Waitie E. Polley Graham who was 36 years old. She was a widow with a 12-year-old son.

In 1869 they moved west to Lincoln, Nebraska. John served two years on the City council, and was elected as a Republican to be Secretary of State for the State of Nebraska. One of the new counties of Nebraska was named in his honor. He evidently was involved in a railroad land transaction that did not work out and in a nursery business that the grasshoppers devastated. John left Nebraska to look for greener pastures but Waitie and her son chose to stay in Lincoln. A later Lincoln newspaper stated that John had left Nebraska somewhat embarrassed but had returned to settle accounts.

Appointment as Territorial Secretary

He believed those greener pastures were to be found further west. In 1876 Gosper visited Arizona, and when the post of Territorial Secretary became vacant the following year he asked for the appointment, and in April 1877, President Hayes granted that wish. Gosper arrived in Yuma in May and took the oath of office on May 24 before traveling to Tucson—only to be on the road again as the Capitol was moving back to Prescott. It was the 1879 legislative session that he first served and there were good and bad press reports of his service. This same legislative session granted one of the infamous legislative divorces to Gosper from his wife Waitie.

In Arizona the new territorial secretary, was a busy man with a wide variety of outside interests. He sold windmills, drilled wells, published a newspaper, was a director of a bank and an insurance company, raised horses and cattle, bought, developed and sold mines and mills, operated stables and a livery, and contracted for mail delivery from Brigham City (near present day Winslow) to Prescott. Each of these enterprises was in partnership with other men. There is no way to know how much real money John had in any of them.

While in Prescott Sec. Gosper had a ranch on the Upper Verde River where he raised registered horses. This was in partnership with John E. Anderson who was his assistant in the secretary's office and also a deputy US Marshal for C.P. Dake. They also sold windmills, and dug wells together with a man named Lount. With the help of Charles W. Beach, editor of the *Weekly Arizona Miner*, he and Charles E. McClintock, formerly a clerk in the Secretary's office, started the first Phoenix newspaper, *The Salt River Herald*, in 1878.

With A. M. Smith he operated mills and mines, and bought and sold them. He and Smith purchased the Tiger Stables and Livery on Goose Flat in Prescott. He was a director of the Bank of Arizona with Sol. Lewis upon its organization in 1878. An article in the New York Times of April 16, 1885, reports that J. J. Gosper of Arizona is one of the board members attending a meeting of the Mutual Reserve Fund Life Association that day in New York City. The Secretary also collected ore samples for display at the World Fair in Paris. Even if these were not enough activities, the Hon. Secretary also was involved in the introduction of the fish that was to feed the whole Territory and the rest of the world—the carp from China. A few descendants of those fish are still to be found in Arizona rivers.

Although both Gosper and Editor Beach were Republicans and worked together on several issues there was a falling out and Beach

joined a campaign to discredit the Hon. Secretary. It is not clear when or exactly why they split, but it may have stemmed from a disagreement over paper and ink supplies for *The Salt River Herald*.

Charges and Countercharges

Then Beach accuses Gosper of doubling the amount of his expenses and doubling the number of printed copies of the records that he distributed, even though it was Beach that contracted for the printing.

Gosper defended himself against Beach by suggesting the editor had a shady past. He wrote a letter to President Arthur accusing Beach of having been arrested for attacking a woman by hitting her with a chair, of having a gambling problem, and of being the father of an illegitimate child.

A Cowboy Ruckus in Tombstone

However, Gosper's big error in the eyes of the Arizona press was during the "Cowboy" ruckus in Tombstone involving the Earp and Clanton factions. Secretary Gosper and the US Martial, Crawley P. Dake, went to Tombstone together in January 1881, evidently to assess the lawlessness in the southern part of Arizona Territory. He then wrote a letter that got the attention of the President, describing the difficulties in southern Arizona.

Marshal Dake had requested funds from US Attorney General Wayne McVeagh to help track down the bad guys and upon refusal had borrowed money from the Wells Fargo Co. The more resourceful Secretary Gosper arranged for and authorized the Territorial Militia, and the Phoenix Rangers commanded by Major Charles Henry Veil and Lieutenant William Owen 'Buckey' O'Neill.⁴ (The current Secretary of State Ken Bennett states that these commissions stamped with the Great Seal of the Territory of Arizona were the first documents to use the newly authorized Seal.) He acquired 300 sharps carbines and 20,000 cartridges that were shipped from the Fort

Union Arsenal. Later he requested funds to reimburse Marshal Dake to repay his loan. This also became fodder for the press. This whole mess of finances for the U. S. Marshal's office and C. P. Dake's involvement in quelling the lawlessness in southern Arizona Territory could make a whole book.

There must have been some discussion of organizing local militia units to quell the lawlessness before Gov. Fremont resigned since the governor had requested of the War Department that they transfer his son Lieutenant Francis Fremont to Tucson to organize such units. That did not happen. Unfortunately for the next governor, Tritle, he asked for permission. There was great delay of action. The original request was for the use of Federal troops which never happened. The difficulty here, and on many occasions before, was the Posse Comitatus Act which since Reconstruction prohibited the use of Federal troops in civilian law enforcement.

In various lists of Territorial Governors John J. Gosper is listed as either as acting governor or omitted. Fremont wrote his letter of resignation dated October 11, 1881, offering to resign November first and, according to the *Weekly Arizona Miner* of January 20, 1882, Gosper's appointment as secretary expired in October. Tritle was confirmed as governor and H. M. Van Arman as Secretary on March 8, 1882. In the interim there was a gap of four months when Gosper served as the acting governor but the authorization is unknown.

A Second Marriage

On January 26, 1881, John Jay Gosper was married to Sarah Louisa Watson. She was in Prescott, Arizona Territory by September 1880 for she is with those who are called together to organize the First Congregational Society of Prescott at the T. W. Otis home on Pleasant Street. Sarah and John are listed separately in the 1880 census for Prescott. She operated, as she advertised, a "first class millinery shop" in Prescott.

When Fredrick A. Tritle became territorial governor John was replaced as secretary and the Gospers moved to California. In a letter Mary Hazeltine reports meeting Gosper in San Francisco and observes that he has left Sarah "on a small chicken farm to starve." This is in quotations in her letter so was probably a phrase used at the time to indicate that she had been abandoned with less than adequate means. Mrs. Hazeltine also says that Sarah served in a San Francisco restaurant for a time and then returned to Prescott where she assumed her maiden name.⁵

Still Seeking Public Office

Although Gosper later asserts that he is not an office seeker he returned to Arizona in 1879 and is at the Republican convention where he is not successful in obtaining the nomination to be the Delegate to Congress. And again in 1887 and 1892 he is involved but he evidently has lost his local support.

At some time in 1885 John moved his business to Los Angeles where he opened a mining and real estate office. "Here, as it has been elsewhere, his neighbors and friends have singled him out to hold places of trust and responsibility. He has been selected as a delegate to nearly every city, county and state convention of his party held since he became a citizen of California. Because of his personal popularity and readiness of speech he is always in much demand in conventions to make nominating speeches. At the invitation of the State Central Committee he became one of the regular State speakers during the Harrison campaign. Recently he was elected a member of the Public School Board of his city, which he is now filling. Few men there are of his age who have occupied so many places of public trust and responsibility, yet he is not an office seeker. Recognizing his force and integrity of character, coupled with his push and public spirit, we predict for this self-made man a future far more prominent and useful than has

been his past."⁶ He died without funds in the county hospital on May 14, 1913.

Final Remembrances

John Jay Gosper's passing was not without notice. From the *Mohave County Miner* April 19, 1913: "He was always a warm friend of Arizona and did much to create sentiment in favor among California representatives during the fight in congress for the admission of the territory as a state. The action of our legislature in providing means for the burial of the deceased is most commendable."

From the New York Times, May 16, 1913, Dateline Los Angeles May 15: "Refusing all offers of aid from friends, Col. John J. Gosper, former Governor of Arizona and patriot of national fame, died yesterday in poverty at the county hospital. Once affluent, Col. Gosper was almost penniless at the time of his death. He said he would rather die than be the object of charity . . . Through unfortunate mining investments he lost his money, and for several years lived in a little room at Third and Main Streets."

"John was buried in Evergreen Cemetery, the oldest existing cemetery within the city limits of L.A. He had no children. He dabbled in mining interests, because his wife wrote to the U.S. Pension Office on stationary headed with 'J.J. Gosper, Mining and Real Estate.' Sad to say, he died in poverty, and the Governor of Arizona sent his widow \$200 for burial expenses!"⁷



¹ Goff, John S., Arizona Territorial Officials

² Wagoner, Arizona Territory 1863-1912, page 182

³ Personal communication with Linda Smetzer and the Gosper family.

⁴ Veil, Fred; personal interview and documents

⁵ Archives, Sharlot Hall Museum

⁶ Biographies, Los Angeles County

⁷ Kidd, Laurinda; rootsweb.ancestry.com