



THOMAS E. WATSON

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Populist Nominee for the Vice-Presidency.

AT one o'clock A. M., July 25th, 1896, Thomas E. Watson, of Georgia, was nominated for the Vice-Presidency by the National Convention of Populists at St. Louis. The Convention by a vote of 785 to 615 decided to nominate for this office before making a nomination for the Presidency. A number of candidates were in the field, but the choice finally fell on the Georgia man, and was received by his friends with the usual demonstrations of approval.

Thomas E. Watson is a typical Georgian, thin and angular, with a sharp face, which he keeps clean shaven, and with red hair, which he takes little pains to keep in order. He is nearly 40 years old, having been born on September 5, 1856, in Columbia county, Ga. His home is at Thomson.

After passing through the common schools of his native place he was sent to the Mercer University, at Macon, for a college course, but at the end of his sophomore year he was obliged to leave

for lack of money. For two years thereafter he taught school, and during that time he studied law. Then he entered the office of Judge W. R. McLaws, of Augusta, and after reading law there for a few weeks was admitted to the bar.

He began the practice of law at Thomson in November, 1876, when he was 20 years old. He began very soon to interest himself in politics, and was elected to the Georgia Legislature as a Democrat in 1882, and served for one term. In 1888 he was a Presidential Elector-at-Large on the Democratic ticket. Besides practicing law and politics he is largely interested in farming.

Watson first attracted general attention in the country at large in 1892. He had been elected to the Fifty-second Congress from his home district, beating his Republican opponent, Anthony E. Williams, by a vote of 5,456 to 397. No sooner had Watson taken his seat at Washington as a Democrat than he abandoned his party, refused to enter the caucus, and became the Populist candidate for the Speakership. There were but ten Populist members of the House, and he was not elected.

Watson not long afterward made the expression: "Where was I at?" known all over the English-speaking world by calling attention to the man who said it, and accusing him of being drunk on the floor of the House. The speaker was Mr.

Cobb, of Alabama, and he used the now-famous expression in a debate upon the Noyes-Rockwell election case. Watson's charge was not sustained by the House.

Nevertheless, in the summer of 1892, Mr. Watson repeated the charge, not only against the same member by innuendo, but also as a general one against many members of the House, and brought about his ears a vigorous protest. These charges were part of the "People's Party Campaign Book, 1892," printed, as Watson said in his preface:

"In order that editors, speakers, lecturers and voters might have in the convenient storehouse of one volume all the scattered information now contained in many, and in order that they might have a brief statement of the line of argument which we adopt upon all essential issues."

In this book Watson declared that: "Extravagance has been the order of the day. Absenteeism was never so pronounced. Lack of purpose was never so clear. Lack of common business prudence never more glaring. Drunken members have reeled about the aisles, a disgrace to the republic. Drunken speakers have debated grave issues on the floor, and in the midst of maudlin ramblings have been heard to ask, 'Mr. Speaker, where was I at?' Useless employés crowd every corridor. Useless expenditures pervade every department."

Mr. Wheeler, of Alabama, brought these charges to the attention of the House, and a committee was appointed to look into them.

Watson reiterated the charges in the House and said :

“There is not a charge in this paragraph that has not been made from that press gallery and sent ringing through the newspapers of this land, but now, because I have made it, and because ten of the People's Party are here, powerless in the grasp of your tyrannical party, you want to select me for a scapegoat—for a martyr to your prejudice.

“I want no matter of grace from this Democratic majority that seeks to hiss me down when I am defending my character here on the floor of the House. Jeffersonian Democracy grants to a man freedom of speech and freedom of press, and if you want to howl me down do it, and I will appeal from your tyranny to the fairer sense of justice that abides in the hearts of the American people. I scorn your grace. I scorn your mercy.”

The committee of investigation consisted of Messrs. Boatner, Wolverton, Buchanan, of Virginia; Grout and Jerry Simpson. The committee heard a number of witnesses, and on August 5, the last day of the session, reported that the charges were false and libelous in the sense in which they were made.

The desertion of his party angered the Democrats of his district, and they put up James C. C. Black, an Augusta lawyer, against Watson at the next election. Watson ran as the candidate of the People's Party. He was beaten by a vote of 17,772 for Black against his 12,332 votes.

In the fall of 1894 Watson ran against Black for the Fifty-fourth Congress. This time he ran as a Populist. It was a campaign of almost unrivaled bitterness. The country was arrayed against the towns, and prejudice and passion were appealed to. Black and Watson held a number of joint debates, and these seemed to increase the excitement.

Watson declared that he was in danger of assassination. He sent out couriers through the country, and summoned his supporters from the different counties of his district. They swarmed into Thomson from all sides, mounted and armed, and camped around his house to protect him from being lynched by the Democrats. Throughout the rest of the campaign Watson carried a rifle whenever he appeared in public. He was beaten in the election by a majority for Black of about 7,000.

Watson then charged that he had been beaten by frauds at the polls, and challenged Black to leave the decision as to who was properly elected to a commission of five, two to be selected by each

candidate, and the fifth by these four, the commission to canvass the votes, and declare who was rightfully elected. Mr. Black replied, showing that no such commission could have any authority, but offering to resign, and leave the matter to a new election.

"I am in no degree responsible for this terrible state of affairs," Mr. Black wrote, "for I have preached no gospel of bitterness. I have appealed to no prejudice. I have not sought to array the country against the town. I have not taught that there was natural hostility between one set of citizens engaged in one pursuit and others engaged in other pursuits. I have not persuaded one class that they are the victims of another, and lashed them into frenzy at the thought. I have not sought to combine the rich against the poor nor the poor against the rich. I have not conjured up visions of impossible wealth and prosperity and earthly happiness, and maddened the believers in such dreams against their fellow-citizens as conspirators, keeping them out of these utopias, these elysian fields."

Mr. Black took his place in Congress, as he proposed, and then resigned to give Mr. Watson a chance to beat him if he could. A special election was held, and Watson was decisively defeated. Since that time he has devoted himself principally to the running of a Populist newspaper at Atlanta.

After Mr. Watson's nomination at St. Louis, efforts were made in certain quarters to induce him to resign in favor of Mr. Sewall, Democratic nominee for the Vice-Presidency. Mr. Watson refused to do so, claiming that his name was needed to maintain the organization of the Populists, and prevent it from going out of existence.

As he has shown great resolution many times in the face of opposition, he can be relied upon to hold his position when he has once taken it.

In all the qualities of a bold and successful leader he has shown himself well equipped. His name is one of strength to his party in Georgia and other parts of the South, and his aggressive spirit has done much toward disseminating the views of the Populists and advancing their cause.

After the action of the Populist Convention at St. Louis, Mr. Watson said:

"We have conceded everything short of the extinction of our party. To go into the national campaign with no Populist on the national ticket disbands the party. The Democratic managers knew this, and they have bent every energy to that end. It is not so much free silver they want as it is the death of the People's Party.

"If they are honestly intent upon free silver legislation, why should they object to the continued existence of the People's Party? Have we not been true to free silver when they were not?"

Were we not the only champions of that cause in 1893, when the Democrats were closing the mints and refusing even to coin the Government's own seigniorage?

“Why should the Democratic managers demand of us complete and unconditional surrender? They say we must fuse, but their idea of fusion is that we must play minnow while they play trout; we play Junebug while they play duck; we play Jonah while they play whale.”