

DOWN MEMORY LANE

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Local Heroes

John White Geary, 1819 - 1873

At first glance, the tenure of John White Geary as governor of Pennsylvania (1867-73) does not appear exceptional. A closer look, however, at this multi-talented man and his administration reveals a vigorous, experienced visionary at work solving Pennsylvania's post-war domestic problems. Govern Geary reduced the state debt by six million dollars. He lowered state taxes. He aided southern counties devastated by Civil War raids. He greatly improved public education including support of twelve Normal schools (these schools graduated 46 teachers in 1867). Geary turned back the threat of a railroad monopoly and pushed state oversight of the fraud-ridden insurance industry. Geary also set in motion a long-needed revision of the state constitution. And he initiated an event he would not live to see: the famous 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, celebrating America's one hundred years of progress. How did a man born in the western foothills of Chestnut Ridge achieve such competence? Simple. Intelligence, an adventurous spirit, a good family background, and lots of experience.

John White Geary was born near Mount Pleasant to Richard Geary and Margaret White Geary, noted for their liberal education, refinement, and moral stature. Their background was Scots-Irish and Presbyterian. John became an accomplished student. Sadly, his father died shortly after John entered Jefferson College. He returned home, to support his mother, to teach, and to clerk in a store. Later, resuming his schooling, he was admitted to the Westmoreland bar. But John loved the active life, and thus went on to study engineering. He soon hired on as engineer and surveyor for the state of Kentucky and the Green river Railroad. When he returned to Chestnut ridge, he had enough money to pay all his late father's debts. He then was appointed assistant supervisor and the engineer to the Allegheny Portage Railroad, the world-famous triumph of wheels and pulleys which enabled canal boats to cross the Alleghenies and be lowered into the Ohio basin.



CRHS Archives

Geary's career shifted dramatically when war broke out with Mexico. Immediately John organized a Cambria company, which he dubbed the American Highlanders. The company became part of the 2nd Pennsylvania Regiment, headed by Colonel Roberts; John became lieutenant colonel.

Roberts' company served under General Scott, whose mission was to invade Veracruz, march inland and take Mexico City. It was not an easy mission. Soldiers died of diseases native to the semi-tropical land, including Colonel Roberts, whom Geary replaced. Others died of wounds in the many battles on their advance, Geary himself being wounded at Chapultepec. Fighting grew fiercer as they approached the capital; the city could only be reached by a series of causeways across swampland. With Scott heading the army and Geary in command of the 2nd Regiment, Mexico City was taken with 6000 troops.

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