

PREFACE



It is never easy to explain to a later generation the achievements of an earlier one in shattering an unacceptable status quo, because these achievements in turn have become a status quo beyond which it wishes to advance.

Historian Frank Freidel

This book is a political and cultural biography of Leon Abbett, an accomplished political leader, who twice served as governor of New Jersey during the late nineteenth century. An ardent Democrat, he had the flexibility and manipulative skills of a person who maximized his power. He was clearly the dominating figure on the political scene. A man of multiple talents, Abbett was a master of persuasion. In a sharply divided political climate, he convinced skeptical Democrats to support his programs. Adept in the political arts, he became the most charismatic, controversial, and passionate politician in the Garden State. In fact, he was a power in the state party for the better part of two generations. Yet, ironically, he was twice defeated for the United States Senate by the state legislature, not by the will of the voters. Indeed, he paid a heavy personal price for power.

The son of a journeyman hatter, Abbett was born and raised in antebellum Philadelphia, where he became a lawyer and moved to New Jersey. As governor of his adopted state, he did not embrace the social aristocracy or those who had inherited wealth and social position. On the contrary, he built a remarkable political career on the plainest of foundations, appealing mainly to the impoverished urban lower classes and the hardscrabble farmers earning a bare subsistence. Early in his career as a state legislator, he saw the importance of connecting with the masses. Abbett was man of the people, whose roots in the working class ran deep. His compassion for the working poor was genuine. Staunchly pro-labor and pro-immigrant, he cared passionately about the plight of the wage-earning class and the thousands of foreign immigrants who flocked to New Jersey struggling to gain a foothold in America.

Reared as a commoner, Abbett was imbued with the ideological elixir of Jacksonian democracy, and he presented himself to the electorate as a candidate who would fight to defend "the little people" against "the powerful." Conflict in



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his view was the key to great leadership. In shattering an unacceptable status quo, he provided the kind of leadership that attracted emotional identification among the working class and the poor. The little people repaid him in kind with their votes and gratitude. Abbett's public career provides a classic illustration of the little guy versus the big guy. Certainly all the makings for high drama are in place here. It is an irresistible story; one that reveals a dramatically contested past and conveys the spirit and vitality of the Gilded Age. In all, this book covers that period of American political and social history beginning in the immediate aftermath of the Jacksonian era (the early 1840s) and extending through the origins of the Progressive movement (the early 1890s).

Amid a rising tide of cultural conservatism and an industrializing economy, these were dramatically changing times. New Jersey underwent tremendous social, economic, and cultural change that had profound consequences on its society during the second half of the nineteenth century. Many things were happening simultaneously in the state. Among the more pronounced changes were massive immigration, the explosive growth of cities, great railroad expansion, rapid industrialization, and the emergence of political machines. The convergence of these forces, coupled with startling new inventions and advances in technology, brought about a much different world. The state was being transformed. It was a postagrarian society engulfed in social turmoil, on the brink of modernity.

A powerful symbol of machine politics, Governor Abbett was viewed with deep suspicion and contempt by his critics and the partisan news media. They saw him as a rabble-rouser, a power-hungry politician, an unscrupulous demagogue, and a political charlatan of the worse stripe. A veteran of the political wars and a tough political infighter, Abbett challenged the established order and did not conform to the political correctness of his time. People everywhere in New Jersey had reason to feel worried about the distorted picture of the governor that emerged in the print media. Undoubtedly, Abbett made waves and loomed as a maverick in his own party, standing against the wind. Even those who deplored his actions and objectives recognized him as a man of unusual talents. His actions and policies were a harbinger of things to come. In fact, he became the first modern governor in New Jersey and one of the first in the nation. He invented a new style of executive politics that subsequent governors emulated decades later. It is also the main reason why his rediscovery is worthy of scholarly attention.

Leon Abbett was an enormously engaging political actor, who presided over transformations in state politics and public policy. He displayed the fluidity of a natural campaigner. Elected governor in 1883 and again in 1889 for three-year terms, he had a firm grasp of the salient issues and laid out a vision for the future. He is an important public figure historically, even if his name is barely recognized today. Reviled and discredited by the greedy corporations and powerful special interests that he fought so vigorously, Abbett was denied the recognition that he properly deserved during his lifetime. Many of his reforms and policy actions were undone after he left office. Anyone who embraced "populism" could be made to seem like a pandering demagogue and a cheap political opportunist. But pejorative words like populism, demagogue, and rabble-rouser were used more to distort and discredit rather than to explain and clarify. Similar to the fate that



befell his fellow Democrat, Governor John P. Altgeld of Illinois, Abbett remains to this day a "forgotten eagle."

Abbett specialized in the politics of spoils, patronage, and class protest like many Gilded Age politicians. He was closely identified with the downtrodden Irish of Hudson County, who were a despised ethnic group. Worse, he was closely tied to the liquor interests and with a corrupt Democratic political machine. In the eyes of many, the Irish were disreputable people and considered the lowlife of New Jersey politics. Everyone heaped scorn on them. Blaming the urban poor for lawlessness and the various ills of society was a common phenomenon. All of which explains why Abbett was so reviled and denigrated by the upper classes. His idea of greatness was to foster strong executive leadership within the strictures of the state constitution. He did a job that essentially reflected his own personal beliefs.

A solidly built man of medium height, Abbett radiated executive energy and drive and had a work ethic second to none. An urban populist well before the term became fashionable, he battled concentrated economic wealth and power in a political system in which class hatreds, religious antagonisms, racial conflict, and ethnic resentments abounded. The governor exploited these divisions and conflicts and had no qualms about playing off the poor against the rich. He was a populist fighter for New Jersey's farmers and factory workers and frequently showed his combativeness. Populism to him was nothing more than the expansion of political democracy. No wonder the elites feared him as a dangerous demagogue. Some of the political battles that Abbett fought were far more noble and far more courageous than conventional wisdom acknowledged. This is especially true of the way he navigated the often fractured terrain where religion and politics collided. The political assault against Abbett was constant from the moment he took office. Subjected to abusive criticism and editorial invective, he was much maligned in the partisan press and defamed by his political enemies.

Abbett governed at a time when big business was colliding with American democracy. Corporations were extremely powerful as they conspired to form new combinations and to fix prices. Megamergers and monopolies were reshaping just about every major industry. By sharp contrast, labor unions remained relatively weak because of the legal constraints imposed by criminal conspiracy laws. The day of corporate combinations was here to stay, while individualism declined. It was the time of the robber barons, when business moguls exercised excessive power and ran roughshod over the people they oppressed or excluded. Taking on the mighty railroads in an epic battle over state and local taxation, Abbett fought and beat them at their own political game. It was a supreme test of his political skills and the defining moment of his governorship. At the time, he was at the top of his career and in the fight of his life.

No man had as much influence in New Jersey for so long a period as Abbett did, an influence derived mainly from his vibrant personality, his indomitable spirit, the patronage he dispensed, and the powerful Democratic party machine he controlled. No governor in his day attained such incredible reach. Ruthless and defiant of the establishment, he displayed an unusual capacity for personal growth and maturity. His story shows that a public figure can learn and mature, even under the most stressful circumstances. He had a unique ability to connect



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with people across ethnic, racial, religious, and class lines. That is what made him such a remarkable politician. He had all the intangibles.

An astute and accomplished party leader, Abbett was an extraordinary mixture of old-style machine politician, class warrior, and reformer. Although caught in the eye of many political storms, he managed to broaden his appeal beyond Hudson County and rose to power at a time when machine politics and political bossism flourished. Abbett was an activist governor intent on innovation and change and did things that most other governors shied away from doing and tackled public issues they thought were politically impossible to resolve. Over time, he accumulated various sources of power and used them fully. In uncharted waters, he emerged as a precursor of the modern governor. Abbett broke out of the party machine mold and overcame the sizable barriers that heretofore had impeded executive leadership; he recast and redefined the governorship and thereby carved a distinct niche for himself in the annals of New Jersey political history. The result was an unusual moment in American politics. Abbett's public career had considerable importance for an America in search of new models of political leadership; we can learn as much from his flaws and failures as from his astounding successes.

A biographical portrait is at best an approximation. Definitive biographies are a rare commodity because there are always opposing perspectives on a subject. The political biographer's primary challenge is to capture the spirit of the person and to locate the moment in which an entire age seems to seek its meaning through the moral drama of a particular life. The ultimate challenge is to make the subject come alive by inhabiting the world in which that person lived. In trying to imagine how Abbett lived and thought and felt, I found it necessary to walk the old neighborhoods where he grew up in Philadelphia and where he subsequently lived in Hoboken and Jersey City. For me, this experience was like reentering the Gilded Age and living mentally in a different era.

My views, of course, are those of a political scientist, not a historian. I constantly found myself trying to visualize Abbett's state of mind, but that in itself presented a special problem. This study therefore focuses primarily on Abbett's performance as governor, his uses of political power, and the ways in which he influenced public policy and reshaped the governorship as a political institution. My interpretation follows closely, yet departs significantly from, the path first marked by Duane Lockard in his superb book *The New Jersey Governor*. As a former student of Lockard, I was hardly surprised when my own research took me in similar directions.

My first encounter with Leon Abbett began many years ago in 1964, when as a graduate student at Princeton, I finished a respectable, if not distinguished, dissertation on Abbett. Although my initial take on the governor was accurate, it lacked depth of interpretation and was not a fully rounded portrait. Abbett seems to have kept much of his private life secretive or at least mysterious. The period we know least about is his early life, because it is so vaguely documented. Naturally, it would better if we knew more about it, because the personal element was significant in his public life.

The major limitation in conducting this current study has been the lack of Abbett's personal papers. Regrettably, they are not available. At the end of his

second term as governor, the press reported that Abbett had shipped these papers to his law firm. On March 19, 1895, a reporter for the *Trenton State Gazette* wrote, "When Governor Abbett retired from office, all his papers—both official and private—were sent to his law office at Jersey City by express by his order. Something no other Governor had done before." This is the only clue to their whereabouts that I uncovered during my research. A careful reading of Abbett's last will and testament makes no mention of them. After conducting an exhaustive search, which entailed contacting family relatives and probing various manuscript collections, I am convinced that his personal papers are, in effect, buried with him.

Whether by chance or design, these papers have vanished. The teller of Abbett's life therefore must reconstruct the whole of him from the parts that remain on the public record. Fortunately, Abbett left an extensive public record. His public papers are available and they include his formal gubernatorial addresses and his special messages to the state legislature. These documents become our best evidence about the man. They also provide a window to his political thinking.

Over and beyond that, Abbett is more than adequately explained by his own actions and political behavior, by his personal history, and by the events surrounding his public career. By highlighting these events and illuminating the personalities involved, we get a much clearer picture of the governor and his political style and manner. In real life, Abbett was a complicated man, who was never easy about revealing himself to others. As he grew older, his reticence increased so that he did not put much in writing, or at least not in private notes, diaries, and personal correspondence.

