Republican Ascendancy: The Gubernatorial Career of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and its Consequences, 1866-1881

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Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain is a revered hero of the Civil War, an icon for both scholars and the broader public. His life after the Civil War, however, remains largely unexplored. This article uses Chamberlain’s addresses, legislative records, and other primary sources to explore his four-year career as governor of Maine. Reflecting an interesting national parallel, this article reveals Chamberlain’s rise, his policies, and the consequences of those policies. Having risen to political prominence with the Republican Party thanks to the popularity of the Civil War, Chamberlain and his party enacted a number of policies designed to promote industrialization and economic growth in Maine. These policies, however, contributed significantly to a growing economic inequality that would then define the later nineteenth-century “Gilded Age” and spark notable backlash in the form of the oft-ignored Greenback Party. Michael Bailey is a student at the University of Maine pursuing a degree in history. His research interests focus on issues pertaining to class in early American history. He has worked as a state-government Intern for the Maine Department of Labor, where he produced a history of labor laws in the State of Maine for use by the department and for the state legislature’s reference needs.

INTRODUCTION

General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain is a nationally revered hero of the Civil War; Governor Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, however, is almost completely absent from the extant historiography, both scholarly and popular. The Civil War icon’s four-year career as governor of Maine, from 1867-1871, is, however, of great historical importance. Most obviously, an understanding of his career as governor adds nuance and depth to one of the single-most studied participants in the Civil War. More importantly, a closer examination of his
gubernatorial career provides a case study of the political climate of the immediate post-Civil War period in Maine. Paralleling the national narrative, Chamberlain’s gubernatorial career exemplified an oft neglected, but vitally important, political change inaugurated in the post-bellum period; he was an exemplar of Maine’s Republican Ascendancy.

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Because of his leadership in the Civil War, Joshua Chamberlain garnered a prodigious amount of historical interest and scholarship. Most of this, however, focuses solely on his Civil War exploits. Scant attention has been given his career as governor. The lack of scholarly attention to his tenure as governor is perhaps reflective of historiographic trends.
Most academic historians have moved away from “great white man” political history. But at the same time, scholarly interest in the Civil War remains strong.\footnote{1}

Although most of Chamberlain’s biographies were written for a popular audience rather than the academic community, professional historians are equally guilty of ignoring Chamberlain’s complexities. For example, the preeminent Civil War historian James McPherson wrote forewords in two separate collections of primary sources about Chamberlain’s life. In both he fell prey to the “gallant general” image. In one, McPherson properly lamented, “The bulk of the several biographies that have been published in the last ten years focus almost entirely on the war years. Chamberlain’s important careers as governor, educator, and chronicler of the war . . . remain little known.” Ironically, he then contributed to this lack of knowledge in the second foreword by celebrating the general as “an appealing hero.” This essay will consider in more detail, and more critically, Chamberlain’s gubernatorial career.\footnote{2} In particular, it will look at another underrepresented aspect of post-Civil War Maine history: its class dimensions.\footnote{3}

Chamberlain’s gubernatorial career was emblematic of oft-neglected national developments in this era and will therefore shed light on political and social trends in the post-bellum period.\footnote{4} Further, a study of Chamberlain’s career as governor offers insights into his personal life and the political climate of post-bellum Maine.

The Gubernatorial Career of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain:

Chamberlain’s gubernatorial career reflected the national narrative in three significant ways. First, his rise to popularity was enabled by the popularity of the Union cause, particularly so given his heroics during the war. Second, his policies aided nascent industrial capitalists in their desire to spur industrialization and maximize profits. Third, these policies were resisted, though unsuccessfully, by a party that emerged shortly after his final term. His career thus provides a deeper understanding of the changes wrought in these formative post-bellum years.

Few individuals enjoyed greater popularity in the Republican Party after the Civil War. Chamberlain’s legendary success at Gettysburg, coupled with the overwhelming support for the Union cause in the North, made him an ideal gubernatorial candidate for Maine Republicans. Indeed, he repeatedly cited his war record to bolster his popularity, and this, more than any other consideration, secured him the Re-
In many ways, Chamberlain’s political career resembled that of another famous Union general: President Ulysses S. Grant. In both cases, Civil War heroics catalyzed their political careers, and both revered generals won executive offices in the first election after the Civil War. 

The Republican rise to power, however, was not limited to famous generals. In fact, the entire Party achieved nearly uncontested political ascendency after the Civil War. As historians Edward Schriver and Stanley Howe noted, “The Republican party emerged from the chaos of the Civil War years with a strong and unified organization . . . [it] quickly established control over state politics . . . [and] went on to dominate Maine political life almost without interruption until . . . 1954.”

The publican nomination. In the general election Chamberlain set the state record for the widest margin of victory in a gubernatorial race. He broke his own record two years later, and this still stands as the electoral record in the state of Maine.
party controlled the governor’s office from 1857 to 1878. With this enviable political mandate, Chamberlain and the Republicans implemented a number of policies designed to buttress industrialization in Maine and spur economic growth.

Chamberlain’s economic vision is best understood by examining his suggestions, adopted and not adopted, in three highly important and interconnected economic sectors. First, he wanted to improve the profitability of Maine’s banking establishments; second, he desired to promote the growth of manufacturing in Maine; and third, perhaps most characteristic of the time period, he was an unequivocal supporter of expanding railroads across the state. As he said, “[t]here must be Industrial and Financial as well as political reconstruction . . . The fetters must be struck off from enterprise and the incubus lifted from industry.” Chamberlain envisioned great economic changes for Maine.

Improving Maine’s banking and financial institutions would attract the kind of capital necessary for industrialization and economic growth. To facilitate this, he suggested increasing the interest rates banks could charge and eliminating state taxes on banks. The former, he believed, was needed in order to attract capital investment away from cities such as New York and Boston; a high interest rate, the argument went, would allow banking establishments higher profits, and this would attract them to Maine. The State Legislature eventually, after significant debate, agreed on a compromise to raise the maximum interest rate from 5% to 6%. He defended the second reform by arguing that only relief from taxes would allow saving institutions to earn a profit. The legislature agreed and passed a law exempting banking institutions. According to the plan, these changes would attract more capital investments. Chamberlain welcomed these investors: “[w]e need not fear the enterprises of capitalists from abroad.” Their capital would bring prosperity to Maine, transforming the state from an agrarian to an industrialized economy.

Chamberlain recognized that first and foremost manufacturing needed workers; capital needed labor. Not unlike the rest of the nation, Maine’s male population had been significantly reduced by the bloodshed of the Civil War. Exacerbating this problem was a national demographic shift to the West. Maine’s population was, in fact, hit particularly hard by what was then called “Ohio fever.” To remedy this, Chamberlain endorsed programs to encourage Scandinavian immigrants, especially from Sweden. In 1868 Chamberlain recommended that the state hire an agent to recruit families from Scandinavian countries and cover the costs of founding a colony. The following year the
appointed agent traveled to Norway and Sweden, and a colony was established in 1871. These meager results cost the taxpayers of the state $15,624.\textsuperscript{11}

Chamberlain also believed that Maine’s youth needed mechanical skills, and proposed adding “industrial arts” to the curriculum of the state’s new agricultural college in Orono. Doing so, he argued, would encourage pertinent skills for the industrial transformation he desired for the state’s future. An industrial education, he asserted, “would open a thousand opportunities” to Maine’s young men.”\textsuperscript{12}

Along with his plans to recruit foreign workers and train Maine’s male population, he turned his attention to attracting industry-based capital. The general-turned-governor championed a commission to investigate, publish, and disseminate information regarding the potential of Maine’s “water declivities.” Doing so, he announced, would “result in the investment of millions of foreign capital on our hitherto neglected waters.” This hydrographic survey was a recurring theme in Chamberlain’s addresses, and the legislature accepted his expensive plan, resulting in Walter Wells’s exhaustive survey of the state’s rivers and water powers completed in 1869.\textsuperscript{13}

To make Maine even more attractive to manufacturing enterprises, Chamberlain asked for a respite from taxation on industry. The governor hoped to extend an existing law passed in 1864 that enabled Maine’s cities and towns to exempt a manufacturing enterprise from taxation for its first ten years. It was Chamberlain’s belief, common among Republicans, that the state needed to use whatever powers lay at its disposal to attract industry. Exempting manufacturers from taxation provided an incentive to invest, the argument went; industrialists would be more inclined to select Maine as a destination. The legislature passed the bill, and he signed it into law.\textsuperscript{14}

Chamberlain needed now a means to transport these new manufactured goods and workers across the vast state. The spread of railroads westward across the nation and the economic promise of this transportation revolution marked the final element in the governor’s economic reform agenda. Each year, the governor dedicated entire segments of his annual speech to the Maine Legislature to the status of Maine’s railroads. He pointed proudly to the growth of the state’s railroad network and its potential for transporting goods to markets from the far corners of Maine. At the same time, he lamented the obstacles faced by railroad companies in the state. Namely, Maine’s large swaths of unimproved land meant a large amount of track to be laid with little hope of profitable return.\textsuperscript{15}
Railroads, he believed, were like banking and manufacturing in that they needed special support from the state to boost their profitability. In his first address to the State Legislature, he argued that “outside capitalists [would] not come in to build our railroads” unless Maine made it profitable for them to do so. Like manufacturers and financial investors, railroad development rested on a promise of significant profitability aided by state intervention.16

Governor Chamberlain introduced or encouraged a number of other initiatives designed to spur industrialization in Maine. Most notably he championed a measure to allow the state to lend credit to private enterprises, specifically designed to apply to railroad enterprises. He claimed that Maine was “thousands poorer in active population and millions poorer in money to-day [sic] for this very provision.” This suggestion, however, proved divisive and never received sufficient legislative support to be enacted.17 Chamberlain did, however, achieve other measures designed to promote railroad expansion. One came in 1870 when the state passed a law enabling two or more railroad companies to consolidate into one single corporation so long as their traffic connected. Also of note, and akin to the attempts to attract manufacturing enterprises, the State Legislature passed a bill exempting shares of capital stock of railroads used for construction from taxation for their first ten years in operation.18

These laws were championed on the expectation that railroads would extend tracks across the state and connect hinterlands to urban markets, making the entire state more economically viable. Across the nation railroads were the underpinnings of industrialization, and expansion in Maine promised similar economic vitalization. Their connection to manufacturing and banking was almost self-evident. Railroads without goods to transport made no sense, and without strong banking institutions, investment for both manufacturing and railroads would not be forthcoming.

Consequences and Responses:

Chamberlain’s gubernatorial career reflected a national pattern in Republican politics: attempting to promote economic activity by expanding industrialists’ ability to grow and reap substantial profits. These policies favored one class of people against other segments of the population, and across the nation they sparked protests by workers and farmers. Maine was by no means exempt from this civil discord. Where
Chamberlain insisted on protecting the needs of industrial capitalists, he preached the necessity of hard-work and frugality for all other Mainers. Where he saw the need for state intervention to encourage the banking, manufacturing, and transportation sectors, he left workers and farmers to their own grit and determination.

This was evident with his position regarding the state’s debt. As a result of the Civil War, both the federal government and the states had assumed heavy debts. Maine was no different. To pay back its debt, Chamberlain asked for a tax on Maine’s citizens; “Unfortunately,” he lamented, “our chief resource for the Treasury is taxation of the people.” Thus while the state was increasing the tax burden on its citizens, it was leaving its most profitable industries, the emerging banking, manufacturing, and railroad enterprises, free of the burden of taxation.  

What is further compelling is the contrast between Chamberlain’s views on the needs of industrial-capital interests and those of Maine’s agrarians. Chamberlain assumed an interventionist state to help attract capital investment and industrial development, but in regards to agriculture he repeatedly proclaimed the need for personal responsibility and hard work, criticizing the supposed widespread “good enough” mentality that kept farmers from prosperity. . . . “I shall doubt whether our agriculturalists have that courage and enterprises which our facilities call for,” he offered. For Chamberlain, the plight of Maine’s agriculture was simply a matter of poor work ethic. Capitalists, by contrast, required state support. The needs of an emerging industrial elite were privileged at the expense of the rest of Maine’s economy.

By raising the interest rates that banks could charge, the Republican Party transferred the burden of profitability from banking institutions onto ordinary Mainers in order to allow banks to earn higher profits. The state supplied funds to appease or attract capital; it encouraged immigration and industrial training. These policies were neither disinterested nor frugal. Taxing the people of Maine but not the state’s most profitable enterprises meant a heavier burden on the working people of the state.

The Challenge to Republican Ascendancy

In 1868 the State Legislature formed a “Committee on Federal Relations” responsible for determining the state’s position on national issues—particularly those pertaining to the Civil War and its aftermath. The report acknowledged that the national government would have to
determine a means for paying back its war debts, and that the states would have to contribute accordingly. It further determined that the national government should have to limit its expenses and “[e]ntirely remove the burdens from the industrial interests of the country, and to tax only a small number of articles, chiefly luxuries.” In other words, the Maine State Legislature was suggesting that the federal government, as the State of Maine was doing, would pay back its debts by taxing the common citizen and exempting the nation’s most profitable enterprises. The desire was to promote industrial interests while shifting the burden of taxation to consumers. The committee’s majority was directly, and dramatically, challenged by a minority opinion.21

The minority report was published by three indignant state legislators, who argued that current policies were “fast tending to divide the country into two great classes, of rich and poor, of taxpayers and tax receivers, and must end in bringing on a contest between capital and labor.” The gap between rich and poor was becoming evident in 1868 and indeed was exacerbated by policies that favored capital vis-à-vis labor and agriculture. The authors claimed that “monied capital” had a greater interest in the Civil War than any other, however, “not only did it contribute less to its sacrifices, but it actually found in the necessities of the government consequent upon it, the means of unprecedented enrichment.” The economic elite used the Civil War to gain unprecedented wealth, and now their privileged status exacerbated postwar social divisions.22

Labor historian Alan Dawley noted this trend in his study of the community of Lynn, Massachusetts. Arguing that the patriotism generated by the Civil War led to an unchallenged ascendancy for the Republican Party, Dawley pointed out that “opposition to the business interests behind the Republican party was critically weakened.” The party’s economic policies, which benefitted America’s emerging economic elite, went nearly uncontested.23

What Dawley noted in Lynn was not unique. Across the United States railroad corporations, banking institutions, and manufacturing establishments expanded dramatically and reaped the rewards of favorable federal policies. Looking at this development from a national perspective, Richard Schneierov argued that “a new coalition committed to expansion of the domestic economy . . . took power with the victory of the Republican party. It passed into law a program conducive to rapid capital accumulation.”24

While Chamberlain’s policies were contested during his adminis-
tration, substantial resistance did not manifest until its consequences could be felt. This growing inequality fueled animosities among laborers and farmers and led to formation of the Greenback Party, a national third party after the Panic of 1873. The notable successes of the Greenback Party in Maine attest to two political realities in the post-bellum period: first, the disaffection of thousands of Mainers with the political and economic status quo; and second, the fact that Mainers, like people across the nation, did not passively accept the political privileging of the economic elite. Though the Civil War boosted the power of the Republican Party, the ramifications of its policies mobilized a coalition, though short lived, of workers and agriculturalists standing against the industrial capitalists interests.25

Though recognized by some historians, the Greenback Party has not received its due historical attention. Its success in Maine warrants attention because it was brought into being by Chamberlain’s policies. In his unpublished master’s thesis, Everett Meader explains that the Maine Greenback Party was especially popular because of the heavy tax burden on Maine’s citizens. This burden, demonstrated, resulted from policies championed by Chamberlain that exempted the state’s most profitable enterprises.26

The Greenback Party failed to make significant headway nationally, but it did achieve surprising victories in Maine, which is noteworthy because of Maine’s strong Republican leadership and the party’s control over state politics.27 In Maine the Greenback Party, with its fusionist alliance with the Democratic Party, won control of the Maine State House of Representatives and won two representatives to the United States Congress in 1878. Furthermore, the party successfully elected Harris Plaisted as governor in 1880.28

The Republican Party continued to leverage its Civil War popularity and criticized the Greenback Party’s cooperation with the “rebel” Democrats. The Republican’s successful candidate for governor in 1879, Daniel Davis, proclaimed that “the last gun at Appomattox sent booming through the nation that we were not a confederation of states but a nation. A solid South aided by a Party anxious for power seeks to reopen this question of States’ rights. We must now settle this question by the ballot as we then settled it by the bullet.” The party hoped to frame political elections as a battle first fought with the gun and then at the ballot box.29

In reality, however, the rise of the Greenback Party had nothing to do with the Civil War. It was almost entirely a backlash against the policies enacted by Chamberlain and his Republican successors. The Green-
back Party challenged the Republicans’ close relation to capital at the expense of workers and farmers. This point was expressed unequivocally by one Greenback Party member who claimed that he “left the Republican Party because . . . it favored the rich at the expense of the poor.” It was also evident in the party’s political base, which was located chiefly in the agricultural, seaport and shipbuilding centers of the state. It was most evident, however, in the party platform, which advocated paper currency (where the party name originated from), inflationist policies, abolition of debtors’ prison, a progressive income tax, and
an end all state subsidies—including the tax-exempt status for financial and industrial enterprises granted by governor Chamberlain. It called for an inheritance tax and fought for higher taxes on railroads, which had become taxable enterprises in Maine by the time Governor Plaisted took office in 1881. In order to stem the influence of business interests, the party also campaigned for a smaller state bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{31}

Governor Plaisted, as the leader of the party, espoused the party’s views on the growing rich-poor divide in his inaugural address to the legislature. He lamented “the Vanderbilts with tens of millions of U.S. bonds . . . and the tens of thousands of lesser bond holders, who produce nothing and do nothing.” He warned that the “monied aristocracy,” if not controlled, would “rule the country with venial legislatures.” The Greenback Party’s views on the economy were unequivocal.\textsuperscript{32}

The Greenback Party never controlled the legislature and the executive at the same time, and because of this, it was not able to implement these policies. Nor was it able to sustain itself; its coalition with the Democratic Party collapsed quickly after Governor Plaisted’s term in office. Nevertheless, the party remains historically important. Its meteoric rise and its radical ideology demonstrate the unpopularity of Governor Chamberlain and his policies designed to favor the state’s economic elite.

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain’s gubernatorial career is a microcosm of post-bellum America. It illuminates an important, yet often neglected, epoch in Maine and national history and rounds out our understanding of this popular historical figure.\textsuperscript{33} The popularity of the Union cause, exemplified by the heroics of Maine’s most illustrious Civil War hero, contributed to a nearly uncontested political ascendancy for the Republican Party over the course of the next century. With this political power, the Republicans enacted numerous policies designed to enhance the power and profitability of the nascent industrial and financial class. These policies, however, divided Maine society and exacerbated the gap between this elite and other members of Maine society. The Greenback Party’s platform and its campaign rhetoric attest to the widespread resistance this alliance between economic elites and the Republican Party generated. By shifting our attention from Brigadier General Chamberlain, hero of the Civil War, to Governor Chamberlain, architect of industrial privilege, we bring these unexplored but vital historical realities to light. This shift in focus elucidates the Republican Party’s policies, its impact on Maine society, and its role in establishing the basis for what would become known as America’s “Gilded Age.”


7. Chamberlain, *Governor Chamberlain’s address to the State Legislature, 1867* (Augusta, Stevens and Sayward, 1867), 36

8. Barton, “Joshua L. Chamberlain,” 26.; Chamberlain, *Governor Chamberlain’s address to the State Legislature, 1867*, 37; Chamberlain, *Governor Chamberlain’s address to the State Legislature, 1867*, 36; Chamberlain, *Governor Chamberlain’s address to the State Legislature, 1868* (Augusta, Stevens and Sayward, 1868), 44-45;


10. Supposedly, Swedes’ “habits” and familiarity with the climate made them perfect candidates for immigration. See: Chamberlain, *Governor Chamberlain’s address to the State Legislature, 1868*, 35


15. See Chamberlain, *Governor Chamberlain’s address to the State Legislature from 1867-1871*; particularly: Chamberlain, *Governor Chamberlain’s address to the State Legislature, 1868*, 39-43.


17. Ibid., 33.

18. “An Act to authorize the consolidation of railroad corporations,” *Documents Printed by Order of the State Legislature of Maine in the year A.D. 1870* (Augusta, Owen and Nash, 1870), Senate No. 3; *Documents Printed by Order of the State Legislature of Maine in the year A.D. 1867* (Augusta; Owen and Nash, 1868), House No. 100.


20. Chamberlain, *Governor Chamberlain’s address to the State Legislature, 1868*, 32.


27. For example, Maine Republican Hannibal Hamlin was an early leader of the party and served as Lincoln’s first vice president, and Maine’s James G. Blaine was a leader of the national Republican Party for much of the late nineteenth century.


