**Happy Belated Birthday, Governor Bartlett!**

Washington Bartlett, California’s 16th governor, served just over eight months. Born on Leap Year Day 1824, he was the nation’s first elected Jewish governor and California’s first chief executive to die in office.

Bartlett, 63 when he died of a kidney ailment, was also the 20th mayor of San Francisco.

The distinguished looking politician with his white hair and beard was born in Augusta Georgia and came to San Francisco, around Cape Horn on the *Othello*, in 1849. It took him nearly 10 months. He sent a printing press ahead of him.

Rather than heading for the gold fields, Bartlett established a print shop, a vocation he learned working for his father’s newspapers in South Carolina.

Bartlett published the *Journal of Commerce* – the first daily newspaper on the West Coast. Among Bartlett’s other publications were the *Daily Evening News* followed by the *True Californian*, a morning paper.

**He also published the first English-language book printed in California: *California as It Is and as It May Be or a Guide to the Gold Region.*

When he folded the *True Californian* in 1857, Bartlett found himself $12,000 in debt, which he repaid within 10 years.

Bartlett, a lifelong bachelor, joined San Francisco’s [Vigilance Committee](http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist6/woolley.html) in 1856, a reconstituted version of the 1851 committee. Its headquarters, known as Fort Gunny bags for the 10-foot tall wall of sandbags in front of it, was at 41 Sacramento Street.

In May 1856, the committee’s members tried, convicted, and hanged James Casey, who fatally shot James King, the editor of the *Evening Bulletin* and Charles Cora who killed William H. Richardson, the 33-year-old marshal for the Northern District of California.

Both Casey and Cora were incarcerated at the county jail but the sheriff turned the men over to the committee and its estimated 7,000 members.

The People’s Union party, the political offshoot of the Vigilance Committee, elected William Duer as County Clerk in 1857. Duer appointed Bartlett as one of his deputies.

Bartlett succeeded Duer in 1859 and was elected clerk in 1861. He was admitted to the bar in 1863. He was re-elected clerk in 1867 after an unsuccessful bid for county auditor in 1866.

Gov. Henry Haight named Bartlett to the state Harbor Commission in 1870.

Three years later, Bartlett, the People’s Union candidate, became a state senator for San Francisco. When the People’s Union fizzled, Bartlett became a Democrat.

“While he made but few speeches, he took active part in plans of legislative improvement, while he was always to be relied upon in opposition to measures that were corrupt, doubtful or unnecessary,” according to [an 1888 memorial to Bartlett by the Society of California Pioneers](http://www.archive.org/stream/memorialoflifese00soci#page/n5/mode/2up) of which Bartlett was director in 1873 and 1882.

As a senator, Bartlett adopted as his slogan, “Honesty in Politics.”

After leaving the Senate, he toured Europe. Upon his return, he was elected to the group drawing up a new city charter, which voters ultimately rejected.

He became San Francisco’s mayor in 1882, beating the Republican incumbent, Maurice Blake.

“During the entire canvass, Bartlett’s chief anxiety was not so much that he might win but that, if elected, he should be backed by a Board of Supervisors who would cooperate with him in municipal reforms,” the memorial says.

Bartlett got his wish during his first term but, after his 1884 re-election, only one other member of the board was a Democrat.

When there was temporary cash shortage, rather than violate the city’s “One-Twelfth Act,” which forbid spending more than one-twelfth of annual revenue each month, Bartlett sought – and received – voluntary payments of delinquent taxes to tide the city over.

 “No more absurd charge could be made against him than that of indecision,” the memorial said. “He was slow in adopting conclusions but firm as Andrew Jackson in reinforcing them; and, with him, there was no need of discussion upon any issue, which merely called for ordinary integrity.”

During his tenure, he reduced city spending by $150,000.

Bartlett’s performance as mayor heightened his profile in the Democratic Party.

When the Republicans nominated San Franciscan John Swift in 1886 at their convention in Los Angeles – the first time a convention of any kind was held south of San Jose – it was the view of the Democrats that a San Franciscan needed to be nominated to defeat him.

They offered the candidacy to George Hearst – William Randolph’s father – who declined.

When the party convention was held on September 2, 1886, in San Francisco’s Odd Fellows Hall that Bartlett had helped construct, he won nomination on the second ballot.

Five parties had gubernatorial candidates in the election: Republican, Democratic, Prohibition, American, and United Labor.

Despite antipathy from workers who thought he was “in with the railroad” and printers who said he was a “scab,” Bartlett narrowly won, besting Swift by 654 votes.

[His inaugural speech](http://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/16-Bartlett.html), compared to those of previous – and later – governors is noteworthy for its conciseness.

Of irrigation, one of the state’s most vexing problems, Bartlett devoted only two sentences, telling lawmakers it was time to adopt a comprehensive system.

Lawmakers did send him an irrigation district reorganization law, which built on the Westside Irrigation District Act of 1875, the template for future irrigation legislation.

Bartlett was to be sworn in January 6 but election returns weren’t finalized and so the ceremony was delayed until the 8th.

“Whatever annoyance and inconvenience were occasioned by the postponement of my inauguration until today is more than repaid, so far as I am personally concerned, by the fact that I enter upon the discharge of the duties of my office on the eighth of January – a day memorable in the history of our country and intimately associated with the fame of that great solider, patriot statesman and Democrat, Andrew Jackson. *(Jackson defeated the English at the Battle of New Orleans on January 8, 1815.)*

“I hail it as a happy omen, for it was upon the eighth of January 1883 that I was first inaugurated mayor of the City of San Francisco.”

Like most of his predecessors, Bartlett was an opponent of continued Chinese immigration, describing them near the beginning of his inaugural speech as “several hundred thousand people of an inferior race, radically dissimilar in physical, mental and moral constitution.”

Bartlett also noted the “unfavorable condition” of state finances.

Even though the tax rate had been hiked from 45.2 cents in 1884 to 56 cents in 1886, expenditures still exceeded receipts during the past two years by nearly $2.1 million, Bartlett said.

“No one is more jealous of the state’s honor and credit, more opposed to a credit system and all the evils which it entails, than myself. But before placing additional burdens upon the people I would advise that scrutiny be made into the items of expenditure and the expense accounts of the several state institutions, with the view to retrench and reform. ‘A penny saved is a penny made,’ is a homely and true adage.”

The biggest single section in Bartlett’s speech focuses on public schools.

Bartlett urged lawmakers to expand the availability of “industrial training,” what is now known as vocational education.

“The vast agricultural, manufacturing, and mining industries of the state need the most enlightened treatment, in order to compete in the markets of the world.

“It is but just to those who are to conduct these interests in the future that they should be prepared in as full a measure as possible to meet such great responsibilities. I would suggest, therefore, that your Committee on Education should make a thorough investigation as to the wants of the people in the way of better industrial training, and the best way of meeting those wants.”

Bartlett also called for creation of statewide standards on stringing electric wires and digging trenches for heat or steam conduits.

“The system in vogue of granting to each applicant the right to erect poles and stretch wires along the streets is becoming an intolerable nuisance in several of the cities of the state,” Bartlett said.

Unlike several of his successors, Bartlett felt no compulsion to declare an “extraordinary session” when lawmakers did not act as he wished them to.

To lawmakers he said:

“Many important subjects of legislation imperatively demand solution at its hand, and the session being limited to 60 days, there is no time to waste in idle debates, or useless adjournments.

“In order to avoid unpleasant consequences and of being misunderstood hereafter, I deem it proper to state that I shall not deem every failure of the Legislature to perform some duty as creating such an ‘extraordinary occasion’ … as will necessitate or justify the governor in calling an extra session of the Legislature.

“On the contrary, I shall accept such non-action as deliberate, and shall leave the responsibility with the negligent members and their several constituencies — the people of their respective counties.”

Among the legislation Bartlett signed were bills to complete the new city hall in San Francisco and maintain permanent support of state universities. He reduced government spending by $500,000.

“He was always accessible to senators and assemblymen, to committees and to individuals who visited him on public business,” the memorial to Bartlett says.

“But, nevertheless, with a full consciousness of the danger he was incurring, he deliberately sacrificed himself to the exigencies of his station.”

By the end of the legislative session, Bartlett was seriously ill.

He had what was then called Bright’s disease, now nephritis.

In an attempt to regain his health, Bartlett went to Highland Springs in Lake County.  While there he told a friend:

“If I had known the work I had to do would kill me, I should have kept on just the same, for I could not shirk it. I think it has finished me.”

Then he traveled to the Santa Cruz Mountains and finally moved to his sister’s house in Oakland.

He suffered a stroke on August 22, 1887 and died three weeks later.

He is buried at the Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland along with three of his gubernatorial predecessors – Henry Haight, George Perkins, and Romuoldo Pacheco – and one of his successors, George Pardee.

From: [California’s Capitol](http://www.californiascapitol.com/2012/03/happy-belated-birthday-governor-bartlett/), posted on March 5, 2012.