

# **Inaugural Address of Governor Albert Blakeslee White**

**March 4, 1901**

Fellow Citizens of West Virginia:

In assuming the duties of the high office to which you have elected me by such a large majority and on issues so largely involving the business interests and economic conditions of our State, I wish to express my deep sense of obligation and sincere appreciation of the great honor conferred. West Virginia is my adopted State and has been my home for two decades. In young manhood, I cast my lot with you of my own free choice. As the young man and young woman leave their parents' homes to unite in building up a new home as man and wife, on the enduring basis of a love and attachment stronger even than that of child for parent, so has my love for my adopted State become of the deepest and the strongest. It is no exaggeration to say that those who were born and reared on the soil of West Virginia, where Providence placed them without the exercise of an independent choice, can and do have no more sincere attachment for the Mountain State than that increasingly large number of our fellow citizens, who, in mature years or early manhood, came to our Commonwealth of their own volition to make it their future home. By their acts and the exercise of their choice they have shown an appreciation of the great possibilities and future of our marvelously rich area of natural wealth and by their capital, labor, skill, energy and patriotic zeal in advancing the interests of West Virginia and its development they have done and are doing their full part in making ours the richest and most prosperous State in the Union. On behalf of those who have come into our State and their children, I wish to express their and my own acknowledgement of the great honor paid them and myself in electing me by the largest majority ever given a candidate for Governor in this State. West Virginia has thus proclaimed to the world that she has no invidious distinctions or discriminations to make against any person who, in good faith, enters into her citizenship and gives his earnest efforts to making an honest livelihood and to fulfilling the duties of patriotic citizenship.

One word more of a personal character: While elected as a partisan, after being unanimously nominated by a political party in the largest delegate convention ever held in West Virginia, I shall nevertheless confidently expect to receive the hearty support of men of all parties in my efforts to promote the welfare, prosperity and happiness of the people. It is because we can all meet on the common ground of the public good that this confident hope is expressed. In the administration of the laws and in the upbuilding of our State we should be first citizens and patriotic West Virginians. We can best serve our State by joining hands in a common effort to administer all our public affairs with an eye single to the best interests of the State. My endeavor will be to represent the entire people and to be Governor for all the people.

The responsibilities of the Executive are great and yet his powers at best are limited. The incoming Governor has no Legislature to advise with for two years. His responsibilities include the preservation of the peace; he is commander in chief of the militia; he must pass upon questions of life and death; he is likely to be called upon to decide whether the Legislature should be convened in extra session; and he has the great responsibility of the appointment of members of the various boards of administration in charge of the public institutions of the State.

The Executive does not legislate in regard to or appropriate the public funds; nor does he make the laws or interpret them. His duties are to execute and carry out the will of the people as expressed through their representatives and enacted into law. He has to do that largely through various boards of administration. The term of four years is long enough to pass in review, in my judgment, the merits of every member of every board and the Governor who has responsibility for four long years should have at least the privilege of passing on every member of every board during that time. The recent Legislature, which met in biennial session, has conferred upon me such powers in a majority of the boards of the various public institutions, and it is therefore not out of place for me to say that I believe in bi-partisan boards and minority representation thereon; at the same time having a majority representation with a practical working majority. Power equal to the responsibility should always be conferred. My endeavor shall be to secure the best possible membership for these boards of administration and to promote their utmost efficiency. There is no room on these boards for those who wish to deal directly or indirectly with the State in furnishing supplies for these institutions, or who seek to appoint relatives to service therein. The test of membership on these boards should be a disinterested desire to serve the best interests of the State. This course is the only one that will deserve the commendation of fair-minded citizens. I heartily endorse the words of Governor Nash, of Ohio, who, in being inducted into his high office last January, speaking of the various institutions, said: "During my term of office I do not desire that changes shall be made therein, unless the interests of the inmates and the public good are to be promoted thereby."

Our State has been developing in a marvelous manner in the past few years. In the decade just closed our population increased over twenty-five per cent. And we today have about one million people. Our natural resources have been developed in an amazing manner. Our manufactories are many, prosperous and varied, and in iron, steel, woodworking, pottery, glass, brick, woolen and refining industries we hold a high place. We are the first in rank among our sister States in production of oil and natural gas; second in coke; almost, if not quite, second in coal; and first in production of hardwoods. While these things are true and fill us with pride, our very growth and development have been so rapid as to force a new and grave financial problem upon us.

In the splendid inaugural address of my immediate predecessor, Governor Atkinson, he expressed the belief that "from our developing resources we may look for money enough for all our needs, and with which we may be able to lift all our public institutions to a higher plane of usefulness." Unfortunately, our taxation laws are so crude and defective, that, while our population has increased one-fourth, and our actual wealth probably doubled, in the past ten years, the latter does not show an appreciable increase on the tax duplicate. Our taxable valuations of realty show but little gain under the late reassessment, and our personalty valuations are not gaining. Something is radically wrong when these conditions exist. We want to treat the developing corporations, such as railroads and mining and manufacturing enterprises, employing labor and building up the State, with the utmost liberality. The work of developing is going on rapidly and we want it continued until every county and every mineral valley has ample shipping and commercial facilities. Without checking this growth by restrictive or burdensome taxation, and yet relieving, if possible, the burdens on the modest home owners and small farmers, who in my judgment are taxed more, proportionately, under our present system than

their more fortunate wealthy neighbors, is a problem calling for the exercise of careful thought and wise statesmanship. In my opinion the movement for a tax commission to codify our taxation laws, to provide for equalization boards, both county and State, with powers to raise or lower valuations and equalize them, is a start on right lines. The Legislature just adjourned has taken the first step in the right direction by providing for the creation of a tax commission.

The problem which the incoming administration will chiefly have to deal with is that of revenues. During the past six years the West Virginia Legislature has established seven entirely new State institutions, namely, the Girls Industrial Home, Home for Incurables, Bluefield Colored Institute, Montgomery Preparatory School and the three Miners' Hospitals and the late Legislature has just created the eighth in the Keyser Preparatory School. In addition, a Capitol Annex costing \$126,000 has been started, and, in the past five years, for every one of the older existing State institutions, including the six Normal Schools, the State University, the Penitentiary, the two Insane Asylums, Boys' Reform School, and the schools for the Deaf and the Blind, new buildings have been erected or extensive additions made to the old ones. Besides all this, with the growing attendance and more numerous inmates, have come largely increased current expenses. The present generation is prohibited by our constitution from incurring a State debt for future generations to pay. So we are, and have been in the very recent years, paying hundreds of thousands of dollars annually out of current taxes and receipts for permanent improvements. The result is we have a condition confronting us that will take all the business judgment and forethought of the best minds of our legislators and public officials.

In my judgment some of our latest ventures in new institutions were ill-advised or premature. Even an attempt to confine one institution to work somewhat, at least, in harmony with that of somewhat similar institutions in other States and to prevent that which older and richer States, with fully developed resources, have not dared to enter upon, has been opposed. The incoming Executive feels the responsibility of the situation keenly and unless the relief hoped for from legislation, raising the license taxes of corporations and other measures, materializes, some of our institutions may have to be temporarily closed down or an extraordinary session of the Legislature held to raise revenue. Either alternative is to be deplored. We can only hope that our income may, like the widow's cruse of oil, fail not in the demands made upon it, but carry us through the present biennial period. The State gives great privileges to corporations, because personal liability of stockholders is not exacted. Such a privilege is worth taxing and taxing more heavily than has been done in the past. I am glad the Legislature has increased the license taxes on both foreign and domestic corporations. It is a tax the corporations can afford to pay in return for the breath of life which the State gives them.

The question of the proper control of corporations and trusts is a live one. Every year the business of the country, even in smaller mercantile establishments, tends more and more to corporation rather than the firm or individual ownership. The size of the corporation does not affect the principle involved. It is what the corporation does or seeks to do which determines its character for public good or public detriment. We could not carry on great commercial enterprises, banks, railroads, etc., without corporations. The laws make railroads, banks and certain other corporations disclose their capital stock and their earnings and assets. This is

termed publicity. A certain amount of publicity may well be exacted of all corporations, at least to the extent of ascertaining their reliability and whether they are worthy of credit and confidence, and also to aid in determining their liability for taxation. A list of the stockholders and shares held by them would assist materially in securing taxation of stocks in West Virginia enterprises held by non-resident owners.

Another reform which it is time, and indeed long past time, to introduce, is to stop the practice of boards of public institutions exceeding their appropriations for building and current expenses. Cut the garment according to the cloth; or else leave the garment not begun or unfinished. Interest-bearing obligations created by boards without authority of law, are contrary to public policy and intolerable.

If the members, of the Legislature were paid a fixed salary instead of a per diem it is claimed that better results in legislation would then be secured promptly and extra sessions would be avoided by the members of the Legislature as earnestly as by the Executive.

A constitutional amendment to limit the irreducible school fund to one million dollars meets my cordial approval, turning as it does the available surplus and revenue into the public school fund. The State is spending yearly many hundreds of thousands of dollars on academic and higher education, but in my opinion it is not doing its duty by the public primary schools of the State. I am not in sympathy with that spirit of enlightened selfishness which prompts the richer counties to object to helping the little children of the State in the poorer counties to longer terms of public schools. If the day ever comes when our levy for State taxes can be reduced, I hope that the State levy for our public schools may be kept as it is or even increased. With a fair and equitable system of valuations for taxation the present tax levy would doubtless produce ample revenue for a longer school year.

The proposed constitutional amendment as to the fee system may be all right as far as it goes; but it does not go far enough. It takes little courage to strike at two or three State officials, and we can all unite in correcting the evils of the fee system as to them, even without a constitutional amendment. But is that the whole sum of our duty? For twenty years I have consistently advocated reforms in our fee system, but these reforms should be extended outside of the capitol building, as well as include all within it.

The retiring administration has been one of the very best in the history of our State. It has honestly and capably administered the affairs of State in every department. It is entitled, as a whole, to the verdict of "well done, good and faithful" servants. To the retiring Chief Executive I desire to express in this public way my deep sense of obligation to him for his personal courtesies and assistance to me. He is one of the tried and true and able leaders of public thought in our State, and his purpose has always been to serve the people's best interests. He relinquishes the Governor's chair with the high regard of all our people. I only hope my administration may be as successful and honorable as his has been.

Of the future of our State, its possibilities, its growth, its great resources and its high-minded, intelligent and patriotic people, I would like to speak at length. But time forbids. We are a happy, a contented and a prosperous people. We have one of the best States in the Union. With no

public debt, with low taxation, with a hospitable hand to extend to all who cast their lot with us as doers and workers, we look proudly and hopefully to the future. Our past has been honorable and patriotic. The future will find us in the front ranks of our sister Commonwealths upholding the hands of our National Government in every loyal and patriotic undertaking. We enter the new century with high hopes and brilliant prospects. My earnest desire is that during the coming four years the public peace may not be disturbed; that law and order may prevail; that labor may be fully employed at remunerative wages, and that happiness and prosperity may abide at every West Virginian's hearthstone.