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Charles S. Voorhees served two terms (1885-1889) as delegate to the House of Representatives from Washington Territory. He figured prominently in the Congressional debates leading to passage of the Omnibus Admissions Bill which entitled the Dakotas, Montana, and Washington to admission into the Union as states.

Born in Covington, Indiana in 1853, Voorhees attended Georgetown University, then studied law in the office of his father in Terre Haute, Indiana, and was admitted to the bar in 1875. From 1876 to 1882, Voorhees was assistant cashier under the clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, perhaps through the influence of his Senator father. In 1882 Voorhees moved to Washington Territory, settled at Colfax, opened a law office, and was elected prosecuting attorney of Whitman County on the Democratic ticket. In 1884 he was nominated delegate to Congress by the Democratic Convention. Voorhees’ father, who stood six foot four inches tall, was known by his colleagues as the “Tall Sycamore of the Wabash”; his son, in those more poetic times, was dubbed the “Willow of the Palouse.”

The Railroad Forfeiture Controversy

Two issues dominated the election of a territorial delegate to Congress in 1884: admission of Washington to statehood, and forfeiture of the land grant to the Northern Pacific Railroad. Prior Republican representatives had labored vainly to convince Congress that staunchly Republican Washington was ready for admission. But from 1876 until 1889 Democrats controlled either Congress or the Presidency. They regretted admitting Colorado in 1876, just in time to cast its three electoral votes for General Hayes, the successful Republican candidate, in the bitterly contested election. In 1884, Washington’s Democrats argued that election of Voorhees, a Democrat, would more favorably incline Congress to admit Washington to statehood.

The second major campaign issue in 1884, railroad forfeiture, was deeply rooted in history. In 1864 Congress had given the Northern Pacific Railroad the right to construct a line from some point on Lake Superior to Portland, Oregon. With this right Congress gave the railroad 40 alternate sections of public land for each mile built within the territories and 20 sections for each mile within states. This was an enormous amount of public land — approximately 50,000,000 acres. Construction was to start within two years, but funding proved scarce. Congress eventually extended the time to commence construction to 1870, and the time for completion to 1877. The railroad enlisted the foremost investment banker in the United States, Jay Cooke & Company of Philadelphia, to assist in raising the funds to build the railroad. Congress again amended the charter of the railroad to permit it to issue mortgage bonds and to authorize the construction of a branch line from Portland to some point on Puget Sound to be selected as the terminus of the main line.

The bond sales proceeded and construction commenced. Recognizing the importance of the railroad terminus, the Puget Sound cities competed to become the point at which ocean traffic met the transcontinental railroad. The two largest towns on the Sound, Olympia and Seattle, offered various inducements to the railroad to select their town. The
railroad however, quietly bought up as much land as possible on the west shore of Commencement Bay and selected the tiny village of Tacoma as its terminus. By 1873 the Northern Pacific Railroad reached from Kalama on the Columbia River to Tacoma, and a barge down the Columbia connected with Portland.

Construction was interrupted by the failure of Jay Cooke & Company. Cooke's efforts to market the railroad bonds in Europe were interrupted by the Franco-Prussian war, and the railroad went into receivership.

In 1878 conditions began to improve and the railroad gradually resumed construction. Company officials also planned a line running west from the Columbia across the Cascades to the main terminus, but plans were foiled by a German-born Civil War newspaper correspondent, Henry Villard.

In an effort to protect German bond holders' interests in Oregon railways, Villard eventually gained control of the Columbia River under the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company. Villard and the Northern Pacific entered into an agreement for Northern Pacific to use Villard's rails through the Columbia Gorge. To scout the Northern Pacific's competing line through the Cascades, Villard organized the famous "blind pool" by convincing friends to invest millions of dollars with him for an undisclosed venture, quietly bought up Northern Pacific stock, and took control. Villard completed the Northern Pacific's transcontinental line with the driving of a symbolic last spike in western Montana on September 8, 1883, but enormous construction costs had so drained the companies that Villard's empire collapsed in December 1883.

Villard was succeeded by a management which was financially interested in the Tacoma Land Company, and was thus more inclined to exclude Seattle from rail connections and to focus development on Tacoma. The president of the Northern Pacific visited Seattle in July 1884 in order to assure the people of Seattle that the railroad would build its Cascade line through Stampede Pass and to quiet the agitation for forfeiture of the railroad's heretofore unearned land grant. The visit failed in its purpose, and in August the Northern Pacific terminated all railroad service to Seattle.

The hostility of the people of Seattle and King County toward the railway knew no bounds and created a unique political opportunity for Democrats. The territory's Republicans uniformly opposed land grant forfeiture; the Democratic territorial convention, swollen by defecting pro-forfeiture Republicans, called for forfeiture of the unearned land grant and nominated Voorhees, an Easterner, for Congress to defuse the criticism that forfeiture was "the Seattle idea."

In the midst of the election campaign, Voorhees ran afoul of the classic nemesis of the attorney turned politician — an inconsistent position taken previously on behalf of a client. Voorhees had defended the Northern Pacific against a
from Washington Territory since the Civil War. The forfeiture sentiment clearly carried the day, giving Voorhees a margin in King County of over 2,200 votes.

Once in Congress, Voorhees labored unsuccessfully for forfeiture of the railroad land grant. In a lengthy speech to the House of Representatives on July 26, 1886, Voorhees reviewed the history of the Northern Pacific and criticized its predatory tactics: "Alarac and his Goths would have blushed to have been charged with such wholesale and comprehensive villainy."

Congress declined to forfeit the land grant, but the agitation for forfeiture spurred the company's construction of its Cascade line, which was finally completed in 1887.

Benjamin Harrison (photo courtesy of Special Collections Division, University of Washington Libraries)

settler who claimed that his rights were superior to the railroad's, arguing that the land had not returned to the public domain when the railroad failed to comply with the conditions of the land grant — the opposite of his position as Democratic candidate.

The prominent Seattle lawyer Thomas Burke defended Voorhees in a letter to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer which explained the difference between a lawyer's brief and his true opinions, which, as Burke's biographer later observed, "must have brought comfort to many baffled laymen who had long suspected that lawyers were congenital liars." Burke went on to explain Voorhees' change of heart:

The trial of this ... case and other cases of this type, soon revealed to Mr. Voorhees the harsh, unfeeling, and oppressive character of this corporation, and like a true man and conscientious lawyer that he is, he promptly threw up his retainer and severed his connections with a client insensible alike to justice and honesty. He left the employment of the wealthy corporation to enter the service of his poor neighbors... Neither threats or honeyed words nor glittering wealth had power to swerve him from his duty...

Voorhees carried the territory by a bare margin of 146 votes, becoming the first Democratic delegate to Congress.
Working For Admission To Statehood

Voorhees introduced two statehood bills into the 49th Congress. One proposed annexation of northern Idaho, thus increasing Washington's population and improving its chance for statehood. The second bill would have admitted Washington to the Union. Voorhees' bill succeeded despite a Montana attempt to annex the Idaho counties: it was sent to President Cleveland for signature on March 2, 1887, in the closing days of the 49th Congress. For unknown reasons, Cleveland withheld his signature and the bill died by pocket veto. Thus ended Washington's hopes of annexing northern Idaho. Cleveland's pocket veto hampered Voorhees' election campaign in 1888, and it was probably a factor in his defeat.

Elected for a second term, Voorhees introduced statehood and annexation measures in the 50th Congress. The annexation measure was adversely reported in committee, and the statehood bill was replaced by an omnibus bill covering Washington, Dakota and Montana. In the Senate, the bill bogged down so badly that the President and Congressional elections of 1888 preempted the admission issue altogether.

In June 1888 the national Republican Party adopted a statehood platform plank for the Dakotas, Montana and Washington. The Republican platform condemned the Democratic House of Representatives for its refusal to extend statehood to the deserving territories as "a willful violation of the sacred American principles of local self-government..." The platform stated that the people of Washington, North Dakota and Montana territories should be permitted to form constitutions and establish state governments without unnecessary delay. GOP Presidential nominee and Indiana Senator Benjamin Harrison — a colleague of Voorhees' father — declared his support for statehood in his acceptance. By contrast, both the Democratic platform and President Cleveland's acceptance were silent about western statehood. Trapped by his party, Voorhees was forced to distance himself from the Cleveland administration and rely on the theme of his prior campaigns, identifying the Republican Party and its candidate with railway and other corporate interests. But by 1888 the argument had lost its force and Voorhees was defeated.

By the time the 51st Congress convened in 1889, Washington had been admitted to statehood. Voorhees tried for election to the Senate, but the overwhelming Republican majority in the first Legislature doomed his aspirations.

The Omnibus Admission Act

Jubilant celebration throughout Washington Territory marked Benjamin Harrison's 1888 election victory. Territorial newspapers uniformly concluded that the Republican victory insured statehood, if not within a year, at least in the near future. In Seattle a raucous parade and celebration was organized by the
Harrison Legion, a local committee which had supported Harrison’s campaign. Ex-governor Elijah Ferry mounted an impromptu podium on a wagon and addressed the crowd:

We have reason to rejoice, not only because Harrison has been elected, not because Allen has been elected... We have reason to rejoice, for our victory comes near our homes. In one year and one month Washington Territory will be a state.

Ferry was remarkably accurate. Twelve-and-a-half months later, Ferry took the oath of office as first governor of the new state.

The Republican Party not only regained the White House, it also gained control of the House of Representatives by a slender majority and retained its control of the Senate. In December 1888 the House Democratic caucus struggled to decide whether to bow to the inevitable and reap what political capital it could by authorizing the admission of new territories expected to be Republican. Two issues dominated the debate: First, should Dakota Territory be divided, doubling its (Republican) representation in the Senate? Looehe to allow Dakota to divide, the lame-duck Democrats could not ignore Dakota’s population of 700,000, far more than the 180,000 required for a representation in the House, and far more than Washington’s 186,000. The Democrats eventually agreed to allow the residents of Dakota Territory to vote on division. The second major issue was whether to admit Utah Territory, with sufficient population at 210,000, but disfavored because of Mormonism and the practice of polygamy. The Democratic caucus eventually agreed to an omnibus admission bill for the territories of Dakota, Montana, Washington and New Mexico, with a separate admission act for Utah.

The full House debated admission from January 15 to 18, 1889. Each of the territorial delegates urged the House to admit his territory to statehood. Admission of the territories was eloquently championed by S.S. Cox, an at...ney who had represented New York City for several terms in Congress. Cox said,

Why, sir, the trophies of their own labor, the evidence of their own worth. They present before us the cities and towns which they have founded. They present schools, churches and workshops. They bring all — all the products of their labor, and place them upon the altar of the union, a pledge for the common defense. Such a people can safely be entrusted with self-government.

Refuse to admit this state and its territorial sisters? Why, sir, you may enact that frost shall cease in the North and blooms in the South, or try to fix the figure of Proteus by statute, but you cannot prevent the people of this territory from their demand, and you must accede to it;
if this Congress does not we know that the next Congress will. The spirit of the people of the Northwest is that of unbounded push and energy. These are the men who have tunneled our mountains, who have bridged our rivers, who have brought every part of our empire within the reach of foreign and home markets, who have made possible our grand growth and splendid development. They are the men who have made our national life. There is no parallel in history to their achievements. You cannot hold them captive to the Federal system. You must give them self-reliant statehood.

After several days of debate, the House voted to amend the bill which the Senate had passed for the admission of South Dakota and to substitute the Omnibus Bill authorizing the citizens of Dakota to vote on division, and for constitutional conventions in North and South Dakota, Montana, Washington and New Mexico. The delegate from Dakota vigorously opposed the Omnibus Bill, which had the effect of delaying the admission of South Dakota.

Delegations were present in Washington from both North and South Dakota, and they urged the Senate to reject the Omnibus Bill and to press for the immediate admission of South Dakota. The Senate refused to concur in the Omnibus Bill; for several weeks the bill was stalled in the Senate, then in a joint Senate-House conference which sought a compromise. Hopes for admission dimmed as the final adjournment of the 50th Congress and the March 4 inauguration of the Harrison administration grew nearer. Unless the President-elect chose to call a special session of Congress, admission would be delayed until the new Congress reconvened in the fall of 1889.

After weeks of wrangling, the House finally receded from its demand to admit New Mexico. Representative Cox offered a resolution that South Dakota be admitted by proclamation of the President if its citizens voted to adopt the Sioux Falls constitution, and that North Dakota, Montana and Washington all be authorized to vote on a proposed constitution and then admitted by Presidential proclamation. Cox's resolution prevailed, and both houses passed the Omnibus Bill on February 20, 1889. President Cleveland signed the bill on February 22, two weeks before leaving office.

One final amendment to the Omnibus Bill was particularly significant for Washington State. Representative Springer of Illinois, chairman of the House Committee on Territories, wanted to rename Washington as the State of Tacoma. The move sparked considerable controversy in Washington, including a letter by ex-governor Watson Squire charging that the Northern Pacific had chosen the name for the city of Tacoma, had wanted to change the name of Mt. Rainier to Tacoma, and now wanted to rename the state. Watson argued the importance of keeping the name as a "trademark" and in honor of George Washington:

And is not this commonwealth one of the monuments erected to the father of the republic? Why impiously seek to tear it down? Is the monument unworthy of the name? Only an ignoramus could harbor the thought!

The Omnibus Bill would have renamed the state Tacoma until the final vote on February 20, at which time the name of Washington was restored.

Epilogue

Voorhees' service in Congress ended on a high note — he could point with pride to the passage of the Omnibus Admissions Act. A number of congressmen attributed their support for statehood to the efforts of Voorhees and J.K. Toole, the delegate from Montana. Voorhees moved to Spokane in 1889 and continued in the private practice of law until his death on December 26, 1909.

Note on Sources

Voorhees' election campaign of 1884 is discussed in R. Nesbit, "He Built Seattle": A Biography of Judge Thomas Burke (1961). Keith Murray has chronicled the admission controversy in The Movement for Statehood in Washington, 32 Pac. N.W.Q. 349 (1941). I have drawn the account of the debate over the Admissions Bill from contemporary newspaper accounts.

1Voorhees' father, Daniel W. Voorhees, was a prominent Indiana congressman and lawyer. In 1859 the senior Voorhees defended John E. Cook, one of the raiders in John Brown's expedition. After serving five terms in the House of Representatives, from 1861 through 1872, the senior Voorhees was elected to the United States Senate in 1872.


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