



Edmund Favor Noel

January 21, 1908-January 16, 1912

In 1883, Edmund Favor Noel was one of five lawyers who announced their candidacy for District Attorney in Mississippi's Fifth Judicial District. The Democratic Party Convention that would select the party's nominee lasted a week and cast one thousand ballots, according to one historian. But according to another historian it lasted only four days and cast only seven hundred ballots without nominating a candidate. Both sources agree that the convention eventually decided to select a candidate by the luck of the draw. Edmund Noel, who was selected by the draw, disapproved of that process and asked the party elders to hold a primary election and allow the Democratic voters of the Fifth Judicial District to nominate a candidate. The Party leadership declined his offer and appointed him the party's nominee. In a topsy turvy series of events that characterized Mississippi politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Noel was defeated by an independent party candidate in 1883. Four years later he was elected District Attorney, only to lose again four years later.

In 1901, Edmund Noel was elected to the state Senate and authored the Direct Primary Law in 1902, which was the first in the nation. The direct primary literally transformed Mississippi politics, in two ways. First, the white power structure and the

party bosses could no longer hand pick candidates for public office. The people would decide who the party nominees would be, and consequently who would be elected and exercise the powers of public office. Secondly, the Democratic Party did not allow blacks membership in the party, and virtually removed blacks from the political process in Mississippi. The direct primary soon became known as the "lily white primary," and initiated a period of raucous and reckless politics.

In the first primary held in 1903, Edmund Noel ran against James K. Vardaman and characterized Vardaman as a wishy-washy politician who had changed his position several times on major issues. Vardaman was elected, and Noel came in third in a three man race. Four years later, in 1907, Noel was elected governor in a six man race. One of those candidates, Charles Scott, often campaigned in a Confederate uniform.

Edmund Noel was born in Holmes County on March 4, 1856. After attending preparatory school in Louisville, Kentucky, he read law and was admitted to the bar in 1877, and opened a law office in Lexington. In 1890, he married Loula Hoskins, who died in 1891. Fourteen years later, in 1905, he married Alice Tye Neilson, whose husband had died in 1898. After serving one year in the House of Representatives, and a four year term as a District

Attorney, Noel was elected to the state Senate in 1895 and reelected in 1899. During the Spanish American War he served as a captain in the Second Mississippi Infantry.

Shortly before Governor Noel was inaugurated on January 21, 1908, a group of Jackson businessmen recommended the sale of the Governor's Mansion and the commercial development of the downtown area on which the Mansion was located. The *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*



The Governor's Mansion in 1910

described the Mansion as a “ramshackled old barn,” and also urged the legislature to dispose of the sixty-six year old Mansion. Some businessmen also wanted to demolish the Old Capitol building that had been replaced by the new Capitol in 1903.

Governor Noel and the First Lady did not favor either proposal and they saved the Mansion from destruction. Under their leadership, Mississippi's historic Governor's Mansion underwent its first major renovation. While the Mansion was being renovated, which required about twelve months, Governor Noel and the First Family lived in the Edwards Hotel on Capital Street. The original family cottage on the north side of the Mansion was replaced by a modern two story family annex, and the Mansion's original grand staircase was replaced by a single flight of stairs leading to an

interior balcony. Because yellow bricks were used in the construction of the family annex, the entire Mansion was painted yellow and remained that color until its exterior was painted white in the early 1940s. After the governor's family moved into the Mansion in May, 1909, Mrs. Noel frequently entertained local citizens and distinguished guests at the refurbished Mansion. Among the most distinguished guests were President William Howard Taft, on November 1, 1909 and former president Theodore Roosevelt on March 11, 1911. Governor Noel had previously been a guest at the White House during Teddy Roosevelt's presidency.

On May 13-15, 1908, at the request of several conservationist groups, President Theodore Roosevelt organized the first conference of the National Governors Association at the White House to discuss the conservation of America's natural resources. All but twelve of America's forty-six governors attended the conference. In addition to governors, other federal officials, members of Congress, Supreme Court Justices, conservationists, representatives of trade, and professional organizations also attended the conference. On the recommendation of President Roosevelt, Governor Noel was the first governor to preside over the first session of the National Governors Association.

Governor Noel's four year term from 1908 to 1912 was characterized by many progressive reforms that included an elective judiciary, a statewide prohibition law, a more restrictive child labor law, a pure food law, and a state charity hospital. Governor Noel strongly supported women's suffrage, and several significant educational achievements were also accomplished during his tenure. A consolidated Board of Trustees of Institutions of Higher Learning was established in 1910 in an effort to take politics out of the governance of higher education. A state-supported

teachers college, that eventually became the University of Southern Mississippi, was established at Hattiesburg. A school consolidation law was enacted that began the long process of consolidating Mississippi's one room school system and provided public transportation for public schools. In 1910, a statewide system of agricultural high schools was established, with a school for blacks and for whites in each county. Some of those boarding schools later became junior colleges. Although he did not make any public display of it, Governor Noel ardently supported William H. Holtzclaw who had recently established Utica Normal and Industrial Institute for blacks in Hinds County.

During Governor Noel's administration, labor disputes, especially among railroad workers, prompted several strikes and "riots" in McComb, Water Valley, and Vicksburg. Governor Noel sent National Guard troops to McComb and Water Valley to calm the situation. Striking laborers received little support from the general public, and

by 1917 the labor movement had run its course in Mississippi.

Although Governor Noel sometimes engaged in public diatribes, especially in defending himself from criticism by James K. Vardaman and Theodore G. Bilbo, he was a soft-spoken, mild mannered man, somewhat prim and proper. The bombastic Bilbo often referred to the governor as "Granny Noel." During the Secret Caucus of 1910 Bilbo called him "Grandma Noel, the Sissy."

After his term expired in January 1912, Governor Noel remained active in state affairs. In 1918, he ran for the U.S. Senate, but came in third a field of three that included Pat Harrison and James K. Vardaman. Two years later he was returned to the state Senate and was reelected in 1924. During his second Senate term, Governor Noel died at his home in Lexington on July 30, 1927, and is interred in the Odd Fellows Cemetery in Lexington. First Lady Alice Noel died on June 24, 1933, and is buried next to the governor.



President William H. Taft's visit to Mississippi in 1909