

Legislative War of 1893



The election of 1892 brought Populist Lorenzo D. Lewelling into the governorship. The People's Party (Populists) had gained control of the state senate two years earlier and believed it had won the House of Representatives in 1892. However, Republicans claimed 64 seats in the lower chamber.

When the legislature convened in Topeka on January 10, 1893, both parties claimed a majority. The parties elected their own officers and for the next month conducted separate sessions in the same hall. Although each party

made attempts to unseat the other, they proved fruitless.

Tension mounted in mid-February 1893, and Populists took sole possession of Representative Hall locking themselves in and Republicans out. The breaking point came in mid-February with the arrest of Ben Rich, clerk of the Populist House, with the charge of disturbing the peace of the legislature. After his "rescue," both sides began to muster their forces. The next morning, February 15, 1893, Republican Speaker of the House George L. Douglass led members and employees of the Republican House who gathered at the Copeland Hotel on Kansas Avenue and marched to the Statehouse. A few guards tried to stop them but were easily swept aside. They gained entry to the Hall by applying a sledge hammer to [door of the House of Representatives](#). Tension in the state capital was high and a fighting war appeared imminent. In order to restore order and provide protection for his fellow Populists, Governor Lewelling called up several militia companies. Late on February 15 the governor sent for Battery "A" of Wichita and instructed the men to bring their Gatling gun. The militia arrived but, since it was composed almost entirely of Republicans, most of the units refused to obey the governor.

During the three-day crisis, the Republican house enlisted the support of several hundred Topekanes to protect their newly won position in the statehouse. R. B. Welsh, former Shawnee County attorney, was appointed chief of these sergeants-at-arms. Governor Lewelling negotiated with Republican Speaker of the House George Douglass and they reached an agreement on February 17, which amounted to a Populist surrender.

In 48 hours the "war" was over. The Republican House stayed in the hall, proceedings against the clerk were dropped. People's party representatives agreed to conduct their business in a separate statehouse room.

The final decision was left to the Supreme Court. On Saturday, February 25, by a partisan vote of 2 to 1, the court found in favor of the Republicans. On Monday, the Populists went to Representative Hall to assume their position as minority party in the Douglass house. By this time only a few days remained in the session. Although little constructive work was accomplished, the Republican majority did accept Populist legislation providing for a secret ballot and revisions in the state's mortgage laws. They would not, however, embrace Populist proposals for railroad regulation. Populists left without a fight and no blood was shed.

Entry: Legislative War **Author:** Kansas Historical Society **Photo:** Kansas Memory.gov
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Author information: The Kansas Historical Society is a state agency charged with actively safeguarding and sharing the state's history



**POPULIST MEMBERS OF
THE DUNSMORE HOUSE
AT THE KANSAS
STATEHOUSE**

This group picture, taken during or after the Legislative War of 1893, depicts the members of the Dunsmore House (Populist), and a few women and children, standing on the statehouse steps in Topeka, Kansas. The validity of the election of 1893 had been called in question, and thus two houses, the Douglass House (Republican) and Dunsmore House (Populist), both occupied

Representative Hall and claimed to be the legally elected legislative body. On February 13, 1893, the Populist Dunsmore House barricaded the hall and prevented the Republican congressmen from entering the chambers. The Republican Douglass house responded by attacking the doors of the hall with sledgehammers. The Douglass House then recruited six hundred guards (called sergeants-at-arms) to guard the hall, refusing an order from Governor Lorenzo Lewelling to vacate the premises. Finally, on the night of February 16, the ousted Populists agreed to wait for the verdict from the Supreme Court while the Republicans maintained control of the House, and on February 25, the Supreme Court affirmed the validity of the Republican House. This event, although it lasted only twelve days, came to be known as the Legislative War or the Populist War.

Creator: [Farrow, W. F.](#)

Date: 1893

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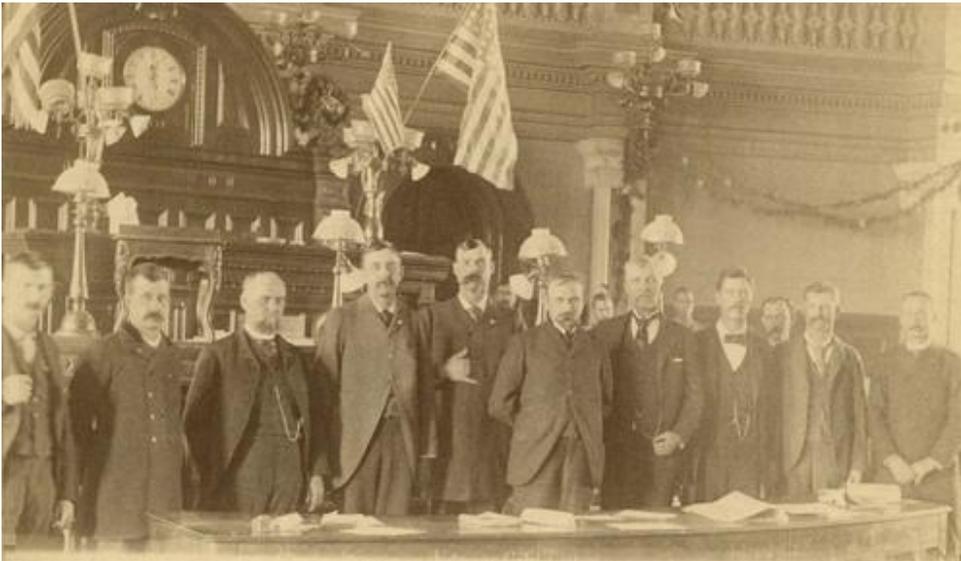
GUARDS DURING THE POPULIST WAR, TOPEKA,

A photograph showing a group of R. B. Welch's guards or sergeant at arms on the Capitol steps



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C. C. CLEVINGER
AND MEMBERS OF THE
DOUGLASS HOUSE,
TOPEKA, KANSAS

A photograph of C. C. Clevenger, Sergeant at Arms, his assistants, and members of the Douglass House in the Kansas State House of Representatives during the Populist War. The dispute began when both the Republican and

Populist parties claimed victory in the Kansas House elections in 1892. A number of contests were still being disputed when the legislative session began in January 1893. The conflict between the parties reached a crisis when the Populists locked themselves in the House Hall. The Republicans used a sledgehammer to break down the doors to the hall. The governor requested support from the state militia. After a three-day standoff, Governor Lewelling was able to negotiate an agreement with the Republican speaker of the house, which amounted to a Populist surrender. The state Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of the Republicans.

Creator: Farrow, W.F.
February 1893

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MOB AT THE KANSAS
STATEHOUSE, TOPEKA,
KANSAS

This photograph shows a mob in front of the Kansas Statehouse in Topeka, Kansas, on February 15, 1893, after an attempt was made to disarm a member of the militia during the Populist War. This dispute began when both the Republican and Populist parties claimed victory in the Kansas House elections in 1892. A number of contests were still being disputed when the legislative session

began in January 1893. The conflict between the parties reached a crisis when the Populists locked themselves in the House Hall. The Republicans used a sledgehammer to break down the doors to the hall. The governor requested support from the state militia. After a three-day standoff, Governor Lewelling was able to negotiate an agreement with the Republican speaker of the house, which amounted to a Populist surrender. The state Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of the Republicans.

Creator: [Farrow, W. F.](#)
Date: February 15, 1893

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DOOR TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, KANSAS CAPITOL, TOPEKA, KANSAS

A photograph showing the House of Representatives door in the Kansas Capitol after it was broken by the Republicans during the Populist War, Topeka, Kansas. The second image shows a print of the same photo in a frame commemorating the 1893 session. The dispute began when both the Republican and Populist parties claimed victory in the Kansas House elections in 1892. A number of contests were still being disputed when the legislative session began in January 1893. The conflict between the parties reached a crisis when the Populists locked themselves in the House Hall. The Republicans used a sledgehammer to break down the doors to the hall. The governor requested support from the state militia. After a three-day standoff, Governor Lewelling was able to negotiate an agreement with the Republican speaker of the house, which amounted to a Populist surrender. The state Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of the Republicans.

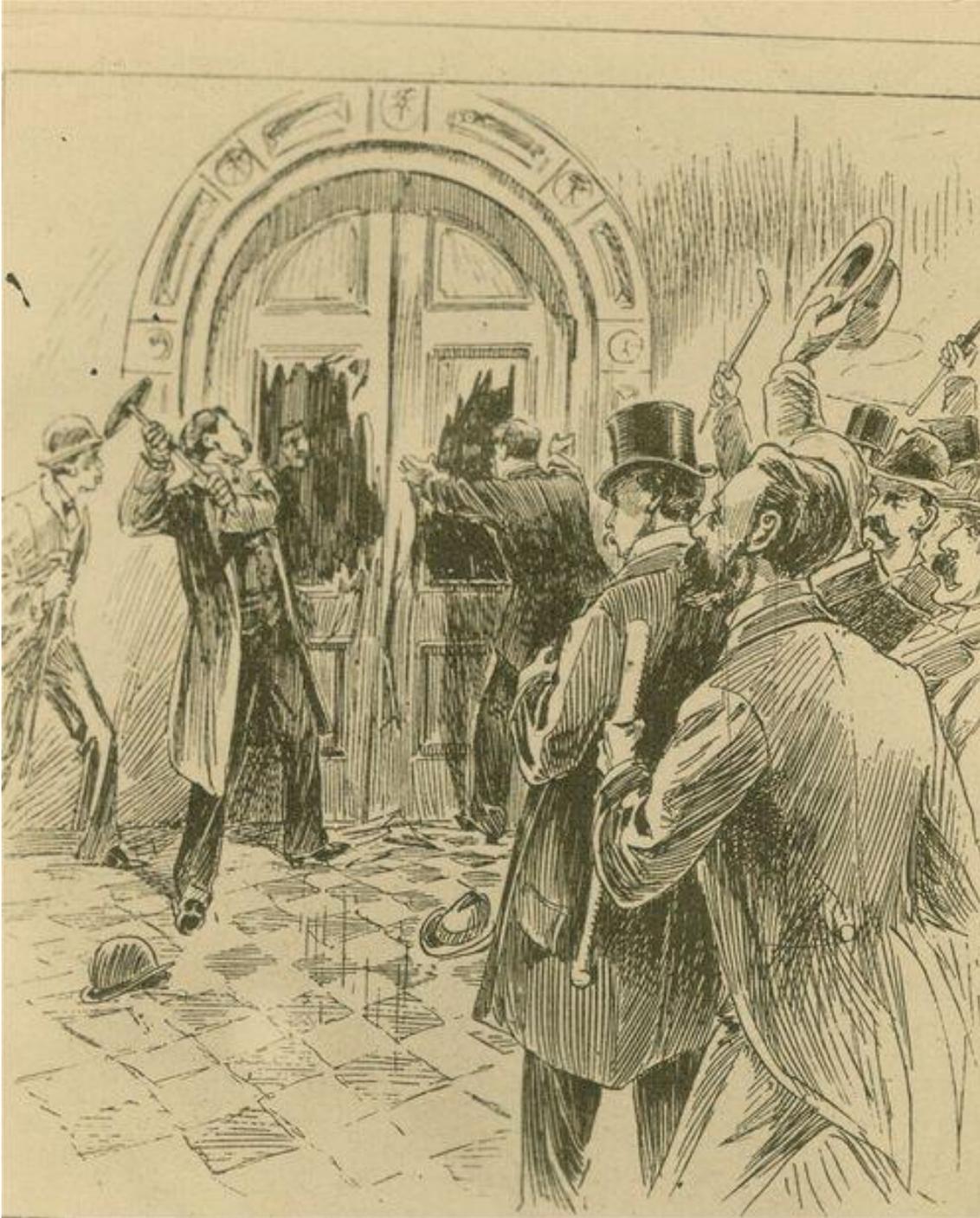
Creator: [Farrow, W. F.](#)

Date: February 1893

Item Number: 236

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SPEAKER DOUGLASS BREAKING IN THE DOOR



This is an illustration of Speaker George L. Douglass breaking in the door of the Kansas House of Representatives during the Populist War. The illustration was copied from Frank Leslie's "Illustrated Weekly" issue of March 2, 1893. The Populist War began when both the Republican and Populist parties claimed victory in the Kansas House elections in 1892. A number of contests were still being disputed when the legislative session began in January 1893. The conflict between the parties reached a crisis when the Populists locked themselves in the House Hall. The Republicans used a sledgehammer to break down the doors to the hall. The governor requested support from the state militia. After a three-day standoff, Governor Lewelling was able to negotiate an agreement with

the Republican speaker of the house, which amounted to a Populist surrender. The state Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of the Republicans.

Creator: [Frank Leslie's illustrated newspaper](#)

Date: March 2, 1893

Item Number: 24869

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MILITIA AT THE KANSAS STATEHOUSE, TOPEKA, KANSAS

A view of Topeka and Wichita militia, Batteries A & B, in formation at the Kansas Statehouse in Topeka, Kansas, during the Populist War. The dispute began when both the Republican and Populist parties claimed victory in the Kansas House elections in 1892. A number of contests were still being disputed when the legislative session began in January 1893. The conflict between the parties reached a crisis when the Populists locked themselves in the House Hall. The Republicans used a sledgehammer to break down the doors to the hall. The governor requested support from the state militia. After a three-day standoff, Governor Lewelling was able to negotiate an agreement with the Republican speaker of the house, which amounted to a Populist surrender. The state Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of the Republicans.

Creator: [Farrow, W. F.](#)

Date: February 17, 1893

Item Number: 24855 Photo Kansas

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