

The Renegade Republican

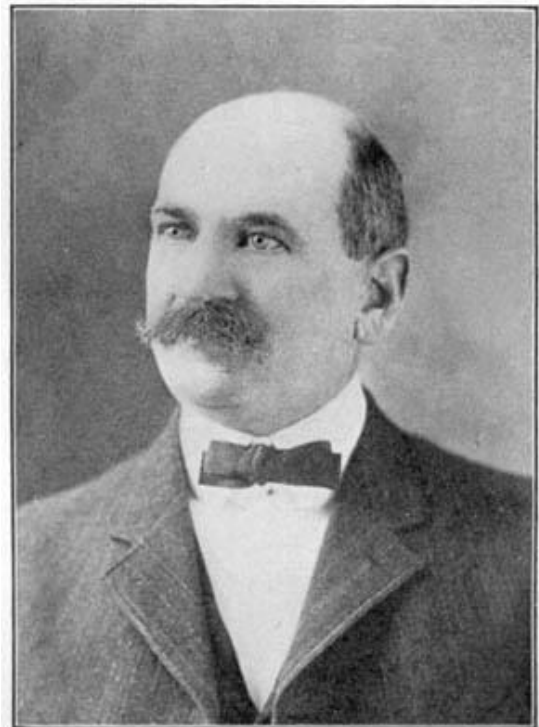
Captain John L. Sehon returned yesterday from his vacation, taken to avoid service of subpoena in the case, in which his eligibility to the office of mayor is questioned. With such a record of avoiding the processes of the law some may question his sincerity when a few weeks ago he took the oath of office to uphold the law.

--San Diego Union, May 1, 1905.

The *Union* seemed less than pleased when a maverick, retired Army officer won the mayor's office in 1905. The election had been a bitter, partisan affair at a time when party labels in local elections meant something. It pitted an establishment Republican, Danville F. Jones, against an Independent, Captain John L. Sehon. It was also a fight between two rival newspapers: John D. Spreckels' *San Diego Union* and E. W. Scripps' *San Diego Sun*.

The political climate in America was changing in 1905. A year earlier Theodore Roosevelt had been re-elected President on a wave of reform spirit. Civic-minded progressives throughout the country attacked government corruption and promoted social and economic reform. In San Diego, reformers clamored for public ownership of municipal utilities and an end to "machine" politics represented by corporate interests and the local Republican establishment.

Representing the reform spirit was a Southern-born councilman, John Leicester Sehon. Born in Atlanta in 1862, Sehon grew up in Kentucky and then he graduated from a Missouri military academy before joining the Army in 1883. Lieutenant Sehon came to San Francisco in 1898, bound for the Philippines and action in the Spanish-American War. But when a medical examination discovered Bright's disease, Sehon left the Army with a disability. With the retirement rank of Captain, he moved to San Diego with his wife and daughter.



Described as a "bristling big fellow," with a bald head "crisply graying," Captain Sehon preserved his military bearing, which included a martial spirit and severe manners. He collected enemies as readily as friends. As a Republican, he entered local politics in 1903 with his election to the Board of Delegates (precursor the City Council).

In the mayoral election of 1905, Sehon ran as an Independent but he was supported by Democrats and progressive Republicans. Sehon campaigned for city control of the water system, police and fire departments entirely removed from the political pressures of City Hall, and an end to "bossism." The *Union* indignantly labeled Sehon a "renegade Republican."

Sehon was strongly endorsed by the *Sun*. The newspaper's support stemmed at least partly from Sehon's desire to push for water development in the El Cajon Valley on lands that happened to be owned by publisher E. W. Scripps. The *Union* opposed the El Cajon development since its publisher, John D. Spreckels, had his own plans for selling water to the city.

On election day, April 4, Sehon upset the Republican Jones by a margin of 2018 votes to 1376. A Socialist candidate, W. J. Kirkwood, gathered 438 votes. The Republicans retained almost complete control of the council, losing one seat to a Socialist candidate.

The reformers had won the mayors race but the opposition refused to concede. A suit was filed in Superior Court that challenged the right of a retired military officer to take both a government pension and a mayor's \$ 1,200 per year salary. Superior Court Judge E. S. Torrance ordered Sehon subpoenaed but when Deputy Sheriff Henry Cook attempted to serve the papers, the mayor-elect could not be found.

Captain Sehon re-appeared about 2:00 a.m. on May 1, the day he was scheduled to replace Frank P. Frary as mayor. Unwilling to risk being served by subpoena before taking office, the mayor-elect chose to begin his administration a few hours early.

Accompanied by several friends, the ex-infantry officer marched to City Hall at 5th and G Streets, and forced open the swinging doors. Sehon then climbed the staircase to the third floor, smashed open the glass door leading to the mayor's chambers, and claimed possession of his new office.

The next morning the mayor's office presented "the appearance of a military camp," thought a reporter from the *Tribune*. A uniformed police officer was on hand to guard the glass door, which was hurriedly repaired using a glass pane from the men's room. Retiring Mayor Frank Frary arrived about noon. After cordially greeting his successor, Frary unlocked the roll top desk and removed his personal effects. He then offered to introduce Mayor Sehon to the City Council at meeting scheduled for that evening.

Less cordial was a verdict from Judge Torrance who, two days later, declared Sehon ineligible for public office and his election null and void. The sticking point was the clause in the State constitution, which prohibited military officers from collecting a "lucrative" government salary while also being paid for a non-federal position.

The new mayor ignored Torrance's judgment and calmly conducted city business while the case was appealed. On October 23, the State District Court of Appeals reversed Torrance's decision, ruling that Sehon's small federal pension was hardly "lucrative," adding that to argue otherwise would "disfranchise a class of eminently deserving men and deprive the state of their services."

Sehon served out an eventful two-year term, marked by the *Bennington* disaster and the San Francisco earthquake. He was defeated for re-election in 1907 but regained a Council seat in 1909.

As a Councilmember, he also served as the City's first Superintendent of Police. Captain Sehon ruled the police department efficiently but with an iron hand. In 1912 he supervised the closure of the Stingaree red-light district and suppressed the IWW "Free Speech Fight." He is remembered with respect by the police department as the father of retirement pay and disability benefits. John L. Sehon died in office in 1913 at the age of 50.

THE EVENING TRIBUNE SAN DIEGO CAL. MON

SEHON ASSUMES OFFICE OF MAYOR

Took Forcible Possession at 2 O'Clock this Morning—Glass in Door Broken—Files Notice With City Clerk—Policemen Are on Guard in Hallway—Met Frary

Capt. John L. Sehon, mayor-elect of San Diego, was up bright and early this morning. Long before the average citizen was out of bed, the new mayor was at the city hall and had commenced his regime.

Capt. Sehon's entry into office this morning was spectacular, even if it could not be termed dignified. It would tend to recall politics as it is played in Colorado.

Accompanied by a small coterie of friends, shortly before 2 o'clock this morning Capt. Sehon appeared at the

whether or not any appointments had been made or whether any would be made today, he replied: "I have nothing to say."

When asked to give an account of the entrance into the office at an early hour this morning, the stereotyped answer "I have nothing to say" was given. All questions were met with the same answer.

There was lying on the mayor's desk a bulky envelope, addressed to the city council and probably containing the mayor's first message to

Mr. Frary locked up Saturday afternoon.

Claim Unsupported

It is understood that some of the supporters of Mayor Sehon are claiming that the reason for his course in getting into the mayor's office was because of the report that some of the opposition was to be there early to prevent his getting possession. This, however, does not appear to be supported by the facts.

Ex-Mayor Frary

When seen this afternoon ex-Mayor

Originally published in shorter form in Crawford, *Stranger than Fiction: Vignettes of San Diego History* (San Diego Historical Society, 1995).