Henry Laurens Dawes Biography

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Biography

As a U.S. senator, Henry Laurens Dawes (1816-1903) sponsored important legislation designed to assimilate Native Americans into the mainstream of national life.

Henry Dawes was born near Cummington, Mass., on Oct. 30, 1816. After completing grade school and the academy at Cummington, he graduated from Yale College. He taught school for a few months, then began writing for local newspapers, read law, and was admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1842. His first office was at North Adams, but he soon moved to Pittsfield. He served in the lower house of the Massachusetts Legislature in 1848-1849 and 1852, was elected to one term in the state senate in 1850, and became a member of the state constitutional convention of 1853.

In 1857, running as a Republican, Dawes was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, a position he held until 1875. His seniority in the House brought him considerable power, which he used to write antislavery legislation. He was chairman for 10 years of the Committee on Elections, chairman of the House Committee on Appropriations in 1869, and chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee after 1871. He was a staunch believer in protective tariffs, especially for textiles, and he introduced the legislation to provide for daily weather reports that led eventually to the establishment of the U.S. Weather Bureau.

Dawes entered the U.S. Senate in 1875. A New England Yankee with high cheekbones and a gray beard, Dawes never achieved national prominence, but he was able to influence legislation to help the Native Americans. As chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, he secured funds for educational facilities on the reservations and also brought the Native Americans under Federal criminal laws.

Dawes is best remembered as author of the Dawes Severalty Act (1887). Originating in his belief that Native Americans should be brought into the American political and economic system instead of clinging to their tribal ways, the act was aimed at breaking up the reservation system. It provided 160 acres to each head of family (and smaller amounts of land to others) who would leave the reservation. After a probationary period of 25 years, the Indians would be granted full title to the land and United States citizenship. At the time, this legislation was considered visionary.

After three terms in the Senate, Dawes retired to Pittsfield in 1892. He was consulted on national problems until his death on Feb. 5, 1903.