

= Ruby Laffoon =

Ruby Laffoon (January 15 , 1869 ? March 1 , 1941) was an American politician who served as the 43rd Governor of Kentucky from 1931 to 1935 . A Kentucky native , at age 17 Laffoon moved to Washington , D.C. , to live with his uncle , U.S. Representative Polk Laffoon . He developed an interest in politics and returned to Kentucky , where he compiled a mixed record of victories and defeats in elections at the county and state levels . In 1931 , he was chosen as the Democratic gubernatorial nominee by a nominating convention , not a primary , making him the only Kentucky gubernatorial candidate to be chosen by a convention after 1903 . In the general election , he defeated Republican William B. Harrison by what was then the largest margin of victory in Kentucky gubernatorial history .

Dubbed " the terrible Turk from Madisonville , " Laffoon was confronted with the economic difficulties of the Great Depression . To raise additional revenue for the state treasury , he advocated the enactment of the state 's first sales tax . This issue dominated most of his term in office and split the state Democratic Party and Laffoon 's own administration . The lieutenant governor , A. B. " Happy " Chandler , led the fight against the tax in the legislature . After the tax was defeated in two regular legislative sessions and one specially called legislative session , Laffoon forged a bipartisan alliance to get the tax passed in a special session in 1934 .

Laffoon 's feud with Lieutenant Governor Chandler continued throughout his term and affected the 1935 gubernatorial race . (At the time , the lieutenant governor was elected independently from the governor .) Term @-@ limited by the state constitution , Laffoon supported political boss Tom Rhea to succeed him as governor , and convinced the Democrats to again hold a nominating convention to choose their gubernatorial nominee . This would have greatly improved Laffoon 's chances of hand @-@ picking his successor . While Laffoon was on a visit to Washington , D.C. , Chandler was left as acting governor under the provisions of the Kentucky Constitution . Chandler issued a call for a special legislative session to consider a mandatory primary election bill . Laffoon rushed back to the state to invalidate the call , but the Kentucky Court of Appeals upheld it as constitutional , and the primary law was passed . Chandler defeated Rhea in the primary , and went on to succeed Laffoon as governor . Following his term in office , Laffoon returned to his native Madisonville , where he died of a stroke in 1941 . Among his gubernatorial legacies was appointing a record number of Kentucky colonels , including Harland Sanders , who used the title " Colonel " when he opened his chain of Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants .

= = Early life = =

Ruby Laffoon was born on January 15 , 1869 , in a log cabin in Madisonville , Kentucky . He was the third child and only son of John Bledsoe Laffoon , Jr. and Martha Henrietta (née Earle) Laffoon . According to Laffoon biographer Vernon Gipson , his parents could not decide on a name for their new child , and for several years , referred to him only as " Bud " . When he was a young child , Laffoon chose the name " Ruby " after John Edwin Ruby , a local businessman whose grocery store he frequently visited .

The Laffoons were primarily farmers but also had some experience in politics . Ruby Laffoon 's grandfather , John Bledsoe Laffoon , Sr. , migrated to Kentucky from South Carolina in 1815 and served one term in the Kentucky House of Representatives . Ruby 's father , John , Jr. , served several terms as a deputy sheriff in Hopkins County and one term as county assessor . Ruby 's uncle , Polk Laffoon , served two terms in the United States House of Representatives .

Laffoon 's early education was obtained in the public schools of Madisonville . While there , one of his teachers was his sister , Susan Isabella Laffoon , who was only 16 years old . At age 15 , while plowing a field , Laffoon was kicked in the hip by a mule , requiring a six @-@ week stay in a Nashville hospital . In the winter of the same year , he slipped on some ice and re @-@ injured the hip . As a result of these injuries , his right leg was one @-@ and @-@ a @-@ half inches shorter than his left leg , requiring him to wear special shoes and walk with a cane and a limp for the rest of his life . After his injury , Laffoon 's parents decided that he could not make his living as a farmer and

sent him to the private school of W. C. O 'Bryan . By age 17 , he was teaching in the common schools of Charleston in Hopkins County .

= = Legal and early political career = =

In 1886 , Laffoon moved to Washington , D.C. to live with his uncle , U.S. Representative Polk Laffoon . There he served as a messenger in the office of Judge C. R. Faulkner , director of the pension office . In September 1887 , he enrolled at Columbia Law School (asserted by Vernon Gipson to have been a prior designation for George Washington University Law School) . On October 17 , 1888 , he matriculated to Washington and Lee University , where he earned a law degree in 1890 . He returned to Madisonville , was admitted to the bar , and began practicing in the office of Judge William H. Yost . He became active in the Democratic Party and served as a county election officer . In 1892 , he was elected city attorney of Madisonville over Ward Headley . In 1894 , he ran for the office of county attorney for Hopkins County , but lost to Roy Salmon by seventeen votes .

Laffoon married Mary " May " Bryant Nisbet on January 31 , 1894 at , the Lucille Hotel in Madisonville . The couple had three daughters . Besides supporting her husband 's political endeavors , May Laffoon was also active in politics . She was a delegate @-@ at @-@ large to every Democratic National Convention between 1932 and 1960 , and actively campaigned for Franklin D. Roosevelt during his first run for the presidency . To supplement the family 's income , Ruby Laffoon became a partner in the Madisonville branch of the Phoenix Insurance Company in 1897 . He sold his interest in the company in 1901 , the same year he made a second bid to become county attorney . He won the election over Thomas E. Finley by a vote of 3 @,@ 335 to 2 @,@ 910 . In 1905 , he was re @-@ elected to his post , marking the first time in the history of Hopkins County that the county attorney had been re @-@ elected .

In 1907 , Laffoon sought the office of state treasurer . He faced no opposition in the Democratic primary , but the entire Democratic ticket was defeated in the general election . In 1911 , he ran for state auditor , but lost in the primary to Henry Bosworth . That same year , he was elected as one of Hopkins County 's delegates to the state Democratic convention . A bill passed in the state legislature in 1912 created a State Insurance Rating Board under the office of state auditor , and Bosworth appointed Laffoon chairman of the board due to his experience in the insurance field and as a reward for his loyalty to the party . In 1915 , Laffoon sought the post of Commonwealth 's Attorney for the Fourth Judicial District , which comprised Hopkins , Caldwell , Crittenden , and Livingston counties . He lost in the primary to J. Elliott Baker , but the Republican candidate , Charles Ferguson , won the general election .

In September 1918 , Laffoon moved to San Antonio , Texas , where he opened a law practice and managed a citrus fruit business near Galveston . Though he had intended this to be a permanent relocation , while on a visit to family a few months later , friends urged him to return to Kentucky , and he obliged after only three months in Texas . In 1921 , he sought election to the bench of the Fourth District Circuit Court . In the primary , he defeated Trice Bennett , a candidate from Princeton , and went on to face Republican incumbent Carl Henderson of Marion . In the general election on November 8 , 1921 , Laffoon defeated Henderson , carrying every county in the district . In his first term , only 7 percent of his decisions were reversed by the Kentucky Court of Appeals , which was a record for the Fourth District at the time . He was re @-@ elected for a second six @-@ year term in 1927 .

= = Governor of Kentucky = =

In 1931 , Laffoon sought the Democratic gubernatorial nomination . As a result of factional infighting within the Democratic party , the Democrats opted for a nominating convention instead of a primary to choose their nominee for governor . It was the first nominating convention held by the Democrats since the Music Hall Convention that nominated William Goebel in 1899 , and it was the only one held after 1903 . The convention was held in Lexington on May 12 , 1931 . Laffoon gained the

support of several important leaders within the party , including Ben Johnson , Thomas Rhea , M. M. Logan , Allie Young , and William J. Fields . He was selected in a landslide over a myriad of candidates , including sitting lieutenant governor James Breathitt , Jr. and Centre College football hero James " Red " Roberts .

Despite his physical disability , Laffoon waged a vigorous campaign across the state . During campaign stops , he interspersed political commentary with passages from the Bible . The Louisville Courier @-@ Journal objected to his campaign style and gave a tentative endorsement to the Republican William B. Harrison , the mayor of Louisville . Dubbed " the terrible Turk from Madisonville " by former Republican governor Edwin P. Morrow , Laffoon promised that , if elected , he would remove all of the Republican officials appointed by sitting governor Flem D. Sampson from state government . He cited the failed administration of Governor Sampson and the problem @-@ filled presidency of Herbert Hoover as reasons to elect a Democrat . In the general election , Laffoon defeated Harrison by a margin of just over 72 @,@ 000 votes , the largest margin of victory for any Kentucky governor at the time .

Shortly after taking office , Laffoon organized the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels , a charitable organization of people who had been commissioned as honorary Kentucky colonels . During his term as governor , Laffoon commissioned 2 @,@ 368 honorary colonels , the most ever by a Kentucky governor . His best known commission was to Harland Sanders , who used the title " Colonel " when he opened his chain of Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants . Other colonels commissioned by Laffoon included Mae West , Shirley Temple , Clark Gable , Bing Crosby , Will Rogers , Fred Astaire , Jean Harlow , Mary Pickford , Charlie Chaplin , Jack Dempsey and W. C. Fields .

= = = Fight for a sales tax = = =

Laffoon 's administration was confronted by the economic difficulties of the Great Depression . While he proposed a number of improvements , money was not available in the state budget to implement his plans . In his first full year in office , he cut \$ 11 @.@ 5 million from the state budget , but it remained out @-@ of @-@ balance . The state issued additional interest @-@ bearing warrants to cover its debts . In 1931 , these warrants accounted for 24 @.@ 2 percent of the state 's receipts ; by 1932 , that number had climbed to 40 @.@ 2 percent . In order to raise more funds , Laffoon proposed a 2 percent state sales tax in 1932 . The proposal was extremely unpopular with merchants and private citizens , and it showed little promise of passing in the General Assembly . On March 2 , 1932 , a mob of 100 anti @-@ tax protesters stormed the governor 's mansion , damaging some items inside . In an attempt to get the tax passed , Laffoon agreed to seek only a 1 percent tax . The proposal passed the House , but a Senate committee refused to report it to the full chamber for a vote .

The sales tax proposal caused a rift in the Democratic party generally and in Laffoon 's administration specifically . As presiding officer of the Senate , Lieutenant Governor A. B. " Happy " Chandler had led opposition to the tax in the legislature . Highway Commissioner Ben Johnson sided with Chandler , as did former Laffoon supporters Allie Young and J. Dan Talbott . In retaliation , Laffoon vetoed \$ 7 million in appropriations and a measure to cut property taxes at the end of the legislative session . Among the few pieces of legislation that passed during the session were bills reorganizing the highway department , making the state Board of Charities a partisan entity , and further removing the Fish and Game Commission from the control of sportsmen . A redistricting bill was hastily passed at the end of the session , reducing the number of congressional districts from 11 to 9 , per the most recent census results , but charges of gerrymandering kept the bill tied up in the courts , preventing it from taking effect in time for the 1932 congressional elections . Consequently , all of Kentucky 's representatives that year were elected at @-@ large . The Louisville Courier @-@ Journal called the 1932 legislative session " about the worst legislative session in Kentucky 's history " .

Laffoon responded to the economic crisis by declaring a four @-@ day banking holiday to begin on March 1 , 1933 . He twice extended the holiday , which finally ended on March 18 . Responding to

complaints of low prices by farmers , he closed burley tobacco markets in December of that year . At the end of the 1932 fiscal year , figures showed that the state incurred a \$ 2 million deficit . Kentucky was also unable to secure significant financial assistance under President Franklin D. Roosevelt 's New Deal because the state was often unable to raise the required matching funds .

Though Laffoon was determined to pass a state sales tax , he vowed not to call a special legislative session to consider the issue . However , in August 1933 , he did call a special session to debate a " gross receipts tax " , which was essentially a sales tax by another name . Johnson and Chandler again led the opposition to Laffoon 's plan ; Laffoon called them , along with Allie Young and U.S. Representative John Y. Brown , Sr. , " the most insidious lobby that ever infected the Capitol " . He reportedly further charged that opposition to his tax program was financed by " a bunch of New York Jews " . Despite Laffoon 's rhetoric , the sales tax was again defeated .

The General Assembly was split three ways when it convened in 1934 . Approximately one @-@ third of the Assembly was Republican , one @-@ third was pro @-@ Laffoon Democrats , and one third was anti @-@ Laffoon Democrats . Using the promise of new roads in Republican districts as leverage , Laffoon and political boss Tom Rhea formed an alliance with the Republicans . The bipartisan alliance succeeded in enacting several measures to benefit education , including establishing a Council on Public Higher Education , extending the school year to six " or more " months , and mandating school attendance until age sixteen . Additional revenue was generated by increasing the tax on whiskey from 2 cents to 5 cents per gallon . Laffoon 's bipartisan alliance also passed a governmental reorganization bill that reduced the number of state commissions and departments from 69 to 24 , cutting several jobs from the state payroll . The real target of the bill , however , was Laffoon 's political enemies . The bill curbed the powers of the lieutenant governor and state auditor , both Laffoon opponents . The lieutenant governor was removed from his post as president of the Kentucky Senate . The bill also empowered the governor to remove any appointed state official .

Having neutralized opponents of the sales tax , Laffoon encouraged legislators to lower the state income and automobile taxes , which he believed would leave no alternative source of revenue except a sales tax . The General Assembly passed the requested cuts , and in July 1934 , Laffoon called another special session to consider the sales tax . Pro @-@ administration officials organized parades and demonstrations in favor of the tax . By contrast , a group of 100 unemployed men marched on Frankfort demanding financial relief . Some of them made death threats against Laffoon , and the Kentucky National Guard surrounded the governor 's mansion to protect him . Although anti @-@ sales @-@ tax forces used parliamentary procedures that stalled a vote for weeks , a three percent sales tax was approved by the end of the session . The tax was derided in a children 's chant that said " Hippity @-@ hop to the toy shop to buy a red balloon . A penny for you , a penny for me , a penny for Ruby Laffoon . " Following the special session , Laffoon was admitted to a sanatorium , where he was treated for exhaustion .

= = = Role in the 1935 gubernatorial race = = =

As his term neared expiration , Laffoon removed Ben Johnson from his post as highway commissioner , replacing him with Tom Rhea . This move was made in order to groom Rhea to be the next governor . Due to the influence of Laffoon and Rhea , the Democratic Party again chose a nominating convention in lieu of a primary to choose their gubernatorial candidate . Because Laffoon supporters controlled the state Democratic Central Committee and most of the county political organizations , a convention would favor Laffoon 's choice of gubernatorial nominee . The convention was scheduled for May 14 , 1935 in Lexington .

On January 5 , 1935 , Laffoon traveled to Washington , D.C. to meet with President Roosevelt . Although Laffoon said the purpose of his trip was to discuss further federal aid for Kentucky , his opponents maintained he had gone to explain the lack of a primary to the president . (Roosevelt had written a letter to the state Democratic Central Committee encouraging them to adopt a primary .) Due to Laffoon 's absence from the state , Lieutenant Governor Chandler was left as acting governor under the provisions of the Kentucky Constitution . On February 6 , Chandler issued a

proclamation calling a special session of the legislature on February 8 to consider a bill requiring a primary election to select nominees for all state offices . Laffoon rushed back to the state , arriving in Ashland on February 7 , and immediately issued a proclamation revoking Chandler 's call . Franklin County legislator John Gatewood obtained an injunction against Laffoon 's order , and pro @-@ primary legislators gathered in Frankfort on February 8 . These members failed to achieve a quorum on February 8 , 9 , and 11 . On February 11 , six legislators sought a declaratory judgment to see if Laffoon 's revocation was legal . The Franklin County Circuit Court upheld Chandler 's call and invalidated Laffoon 's revocation , and the Kentucky Court of Appeals , then the court of last resort in the state , upheld this decision by a 4 ? 3 majority .

On February 13 , the Kentucky House achieved a quorum , and the Senate did so the following day . Having lost the battle against the special session , Laffoon proposed a primary with a run @-@ off if no candidate received a majority on the first ballot . Some , including Chandler , believed this action was aimed against former governor and senator J. C. W. Beckham , who Laffoon believed would challenge Rhea for the Democratic nomination . They believed that a double primary would be too much for the aging Beckham to endure . Supporters of a single primary found they did not have the votes in the legislature to pass it , so they agreed to a double primary , which Laffoon signed into law on February 27 , 1935 .

Seven candidates declared their candidacy for the Democratic nomination , including Rhea and Lieutenant Governor Chandler . Former governor Beckham was not a candidate ; his only son had died in late 1934 , devastating his family and leaving his wife strongly opposed to another political campaign . Near the end of the primary campaign , Laffoon suffered an attack of appendicitis and required an appendectomy , leaving him unable to campaign for Rhea . Two candidates dropped out of the race prior to the election .

On the day of the primary , Adjutant General Denhardt took National Guard troops into Harlan County , which was known for its history of election violence . The troops questioned voters , examined ballot boxes , and made several arrests . These actions were in direct violation of a restraining order issued by circuit court judge James M. Gilbert , but Denhardt claimed to be acting on orders from Laffoon . Denhardt later reported that " We stopped the most stupendous , well @-@ planned election steal ever attempted in Kentucky . Chandler would have gotten 15 @,@ 000 votes had we not been here . " Denhardt was later arrested and charged with contempt of court for violating the restraining order .

In the primary , Rhea achieved a plurality of the votes , but not a majority . Chandler had the next highest vote total , and the two faced each other in a run @-@ off on September 7 , 1935 . In the run @-@ off , Chandler defeated Rhea , securing the nomination for governor . President Roosevelt , not wanting Democratic factionalism to cost him votes in the 1936 presidential election , attempted to bring together the Laffoon and Chandler factions , but to little avail . Laffoon and Rhea , along with most of Laffoon 's administration , bolted the party and supported Republican nominee King Swope . Despite losing the support of his predecessor , Chandler went on to win the general election . In his last days in office , Laffoon issued pardons for Denhardt and others charged in connection with the National Guard 's interference with the primary in Harlan County . These were among a record 560 pardons issued by Laffoon , most of which were to relieve prison crowding .

= = Later life = =

During his gubernatorial campaign , Laffoon had promised not to seek higher office if elected governor . Term @-@ limited by the state constitution , he returned to private life following his four years in office . On the day of Chandler 's inauguration , Laffoon said " I 'm going to Madisonville right after the inauguration , and I hope to get some clients at my law office by Wednesday morning . "

Shortly after Chandler 's inauguration , attorney general Beverly M. Vincent opined that Kentucky Colonel commissions expired at the end of the commissioning governor 's term . Laffoon vigorously defended the commissions he had issued and those issued by his predecessors . On April 27 , 1936 , when both Governor Chandler and Lieutenant Governor Keen Johnson attended a baseball game

in Cincinnati , President Pro Tem of the Senate James Eugene Wise was left as acting governor and recommissioned all 17 @, @ 000 existing colonels .

Laffoon was a member of the Democratic National Committee in 1936 , but decided not to attend the national convention . He chose Urey Woodson to serve as his proxy , but Woodson declined to attend as well and turned the proxy over to Fred M. Vinson . Laffoon also backed Senator M. M. Logan 's re @-@ election bid in 1936 . He was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1940 , and despite his differences with President Roosevelt during his gubernatorial term , he supported Roosevelt 's re @-@ election .

Defying a doctor 's order not to work for two weeks due to high blood pressure , Laffoon presided for three days as a special judge in the Union County Circuit Court in February 1941 . On February 17 , 1941 , he returned home early from his law office due to a bout of dizziness . It was reported that he had suffered a stroke , and after a mild improvement , his condition worsened again and he died on March 1 , 1941 , at 2 : 50 am . He was buried in Grapevine Cemetery in Madisonville .