

A History of the Office of the Secretary of State

By Ron Bryant

One of the most important of Kentucky's constitutional offices is that of Secretary of State. In Section 91 of the present Constitution, the qualifications, election, and term of office for the state constitutional officers are enumerated. These officers are to be at least thirty years of age at the time of their election, and a resident of the state for at least two years.

The first, second, and third Constitutions of the Commonwealth in 1792, 1799, and 1850, did not provide for the election of a Secretary of State. Instead, the Governor appointed the individual to serve in this capacity. The fourth, and present Constitution promulgated in 1891, provided that the office become elective. In 1896, the first elected Secretary of State took office.

Among the duties of the Secretary of State is the requirement to keep a "fair register" of, and "attest to all official acts of the Governor." The Secretary is also charged with placing those documents and minutes before the House of the Kentucky General Assembly. Other duties of the office include the State Board of Elections. Under the direction of the Secretary, the Board is responsible for the functioning of the electoral process. The Secretary also oversees the official registry of foreign and domestic corporations in the Commonwealth.

The Secretary is the keeper of the Great Seal of the Commonwealth. The seal attests to the validity of official acts of the chief executive of the state, and is used in the certification process for other official documents pertaining to state government. The seal represents the binding authority of all government acts. The design of the seal portrays two Kentuckians shaking hands in friendship signifying the Commonwealth's motto, "United We Stand Divided We Fall." In addition to these duties, the Secretary's office is where candidates for statewide elections must file their candidacy papers. The secretary also oversees the Kentucky Land Office that preserves the state's land grants, warrants, and surveys.

Historically, the office of Secretary of State is an ancient one. Some of the greatest figures in history have served in this important position. At the national level, the office of Secretary of State has been filled by some of the most brilliant individuals in American history. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Henry Clay have served their nation in this capacity.

In Kentucky, the Secretary of State's office has been occupied by some of the Commonwealth's brightest and best citizens. James Brown (1766-1835) served as the first Secretary. Other notables include, John J. Crittenden, William Owsley, John Pope, and John Rowan, who held other high offices at the state and national level. Some of the occupants of the office have found themselves involved with controversy. Caleb Powers (1869-1932) who served as Secretary from 1899 to 1900 went to prison for his implication in the William Goebel assassination in 1900, but was later pardoned.

Charles Finley of Whitley County (1865-1941) became Kentucky's first elected Secretary of State in 1896. In 1924, Emma Guy Cromwell (1869-1952) became the first woman to be elected to the office. Since Cromwell's time, five other women have held the post.

The office of Secretary of State has evolved through the years. It is now one of the most technologically advanced offices in state government. Due to the innovative approach that the office has taken toward providing public access via computers to important government documents, Kentucky continues to be one of the leaders in utilizing technology for the public good.

One of the greatest uses of technology in the Secretary of State's office is providing access to the Enrolled Bills of the General Assembly, as well as access to the Governor's Journals. The invaluable historical record of the Kentucky Land Office is available to historians and researchers online. With justifiable pride, the Secretary of State's office can say that these land records have been placed in the hands of the researchers at the touch of a keyboard. The office has won international acclaim for its work in providing information to the public.

Researchers will find a treasure house of historical and genealogical research among the many land records pertaining to grants, warrants and surveys. Among these records are surveys done by Daniel Boone, along with grants and warrants signed by such notables in American history as Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry. Not only can the researcher find the way in which land was historically distributed in Kentucky, they can also trace migration and economic patterns from the 1700s through part of the nineteenth century.

The Secretary of State's office is one of the busiest in Kentucky government. The office receives hundreds of thousands of Internet hits each year due to the massive amount of information stored in its collection. These numbers will continue to grow as more information becomes readily available to the public.

Kentucky's current Secretary of State, Trey Grayson, continues to build on the office's reputation of excellence. Elected in 2003, he is one of the youngest and best-educated individuals to hold the office of Secretary of State in the nation. Under his watch, the office has advanced to new heights in the dissemination of public information. Grayson is dedicated to public service, and envisions an even more efficient Secretary of State's office for the Commonwealth.

The office of Kentucky Secretary of State has served the people of the Commonwealth for some 214 years. The office has helped unite state government with the citizens of Kentucky since 1792, and will continue to do so in the twenty-first century.