

Way We Were  
November 18, 2015  
Thomas Kearns, More than a Mine Owner  
Robert Gurss, Museum volunteer

Thomas Kearns may be remembered best in Park City as a wealthy mine owner (and namesake of an often clogged roadway). Less well known is his role as a U.S. Senator, newspaper publisher, and thorn in the side of Mormon Church hierarchy.

Born in Ontario, Canada in 1862, and raised in Nebraska, Kearns arrived in Park City in 1883. He first worked as mucker in the mines and read geology books at night. Kearns and his partner, David Keith, established several extremely rich mine claims, providing the foundation of their Silver King Coalition Mine Company. Kearns became a millionaire before his 28th birthday.

A Republican, Kearns' political career began with his election to the Park City Council in 1895. He was also a delegate to the Utah Constitutional Convention prior to statehood in 1896.

At the time, U.S. Senators were elected by state legislatures rather than by popular vote and, in Utah, Mormon leaders could often dictate election results. However, in 1899, the legislature was deadlocked and adjourned without selecting a Senator.

Two years later, the legislature tried again and elected Kearns. Though a Catholic, Kearns had the support of Lorenzo Snow, the president of the Mormon Church. Snow supported Kearns rather than Reed Smoot, a church apostle, to placate the national Republican Party, which had strong reservations about a Mormon Church official serving in Congress. There were later allegations that Kearns had gained Snow's support by agreeing to purchase and silence the then strongly anti-Mormon *Salt Lake Tribune*. Whether true or not, Kearns and David Keith did secretly buy the *Tribune* in 1901, but did not change the paper's positions.

In the Senate, Kearns supported President Theodore Roosevelt's policies, and hosted Roosevelt when he visited Utah in 1903.

That same year, the new Mormon Church president, Joseph F. Smith (who had objected to Snow's backing of Kearns), supported apostle Reed Smoot for election to Utah's other Senate seat.

Smoot won that election, but there were nationwide calls to block him from serving. Many alleged that Smoot's first allegiance was to the Church, not to the nation, and that some Mormon leaders still allowed polygamy. Kearns opposed Smoot, who survived lengthy hearings and served until 1933.

No longer supported by the Mormon leadership, Kearns did not seek re-election. In a blistering farewell speech, Kearns said that the Church was governed by a "monarchy" that enriched its leaders, monopolized key Utah industries, tolerated and in some cases practiced polygamy (violating a prior condition to statehood), and manipulated the state's political process.

The Kearns-owned *Tribune* and the short-lived American Party formed by Kearns' supporters carried on those messages for several years before the rhetoric softened. Kearns continued to

pursue mining, railroad, and banking investments until 1918, when he died following a hit-and-run automobile accident.

The Kearns mansion in Salt Lake, valued at \$350,000 in 1902, was donated to the state in 1937 and is now the Governor's official residence. The Kearns family retained ownership of the *Tribune* until 1997.



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Caption: David Keith, left, and Thomas Kearns, right, pictured here in late 1899, were business partners in the Silver King Mine.