

Seth Low Biography

Seth Low

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Biography

The American civic leader and college president Seth Low (1850-1916) was a distinguished crusader for urban reform.

Seth Low was born into a wealthy Brooklyn, N.Y., family on Jan. 18, 1850. His grandfather had been a prosperous merchant in the China trade, and his father continued the business. Seth graduated with distinction from Columbia College in 1870 and then entered his father's business.

Low soon turned to civic affairs. By the time the family business was liquidated in 1887, he had become active in several community activities. He was the first president of the Brooklyn Bureau of Charities. In 1880 he served as president of the Young Republican Club in Brooklyn. He was elected mayor of Brooklyn in 1881 and in 1883. Although a Republican, he established independence from the party. Making use of a new charter that concentrated power in the hands of the mayor, he provided the city with an excellent administration and introduced the merit system.

Low served on the commission that prepared the first charter for Greater New York under its new consolidation. In 1897 the Citizens Union selected him to run for mayor of New York, but he was defeated.

Despite his political involvement, most of Low's time was spent on educational matters. In 1889 (the year President William McKinley named him a delegate to the First Hague Conference) Low was asked to become president of Columbia. Starting in 1890, he gave the school bold and effective leadership for 11 years. He also contributed money for the Low Library, named after his father. He served on the Rapid Transit Board in 1899, which was established to plan New York's first subway.

In 1901, Low resigned from Columbia when he was elected mayor of New York on the Fusion and Republican ticket. However, his attempt to provide New York with the same type of administration he had given Brooklyn was less successful, and he lost his bid for reelection in 1903.

Low continued his civic activities until the end of his life. In 1907 he served both as president of the National Civic Federation and as chairman of the Board of Trustees of Tuskegee Institute. Seven years later he was chosen president of the New York Chamber of Commerce. He also was active as a labor arbitrator. He died on Sept. 17, 1916.