

**Lorrin Alanson Cooke**  
**Governor of Connecticut, 1897-1899**

**Born:** April 6, 1831 in New Marlboro, MA

**Political Party:** Republican

**Offices:** Representative, Connecticut, General Assembly, 1856-1857

First Selectman of Colebrook, Connecticut, 1865-1869

Postmaster for Riverton, Connecticut, 1877-1881

Senator, Connecticut, General Assembly, 1882-1885

President Pro Tempore of the Connecticut Senate, 1884-1885

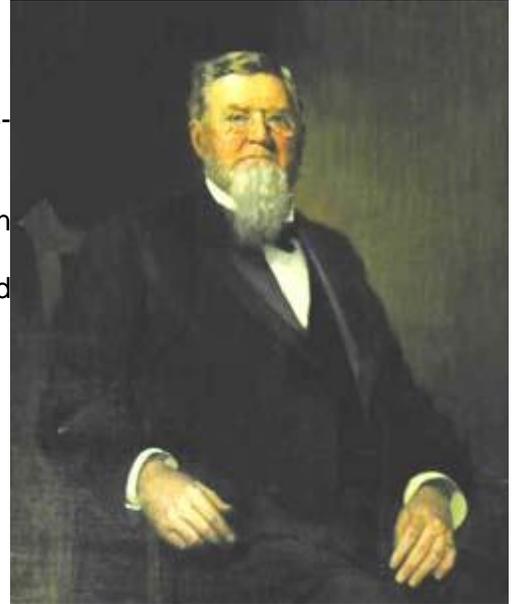
President of the Connecticut Senate, 1885-1887

Delegate to the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis, 1892

Lieutenant Governor of Connecticut, 1885-1887 and 1895-1897

Governor of Connecticut, 1897-1899

**Died:** August 12, 1902 at Winsted, Connecticut



Governor Lorrin A. Cooke used his considerable organizational and financial management talents to stabilize the finances of the State of Connecticut in the 1890's. His work as governor pulled Connecticut out of debt and saved the fiscal future of the struggling state.

Lorrin Alanson Cooke was born on April 6, 1831 in New Marlborough, Massachusetts, a small village in the Berkshires on a stagecoach line, less than ten miles from the Connecticut state line. He was the son and only child of Levi and Amelia (Todd) Cooke. The family descended from early colonial inhabitants of western Massachusetts, as well as some of the first settlers of the New Haven Colony and passengers of the *Mayflower*.

Two years after Lorrin's birth, the reformer Elihu Burritt, a blacksmith who was an early advocate of self-education, temperance, world peace, and abolition of slavery, came to New Marlborough and operated a smithy for a year. Levi Cooke and any other inhabitant who had horses shod would have heard this man express his progressive ideas.

In 1837 Levi Cooke moved his family to Norfolk, Connecticut, southeast of New Marlborough. There, Lorrin finished elementary school and continued his education at the Norfolk Academy. For several years after high school, he taught school in the Norfolk area in the winter, and worked on his father's farm in the summer. He had a talent for teaching, but it did not appeal to him as a career.

By 1850, when Lorrin was nineteen, the Cooke family had moved once again, this time to Colebrook, Connecticut, where Levi Cooke rented a farm. As time progressed, Lorrin Cooke became a young farmer who wanted to learn about and use the latest developments in agriculture. He joined the local agricultural society and was eventually elected its president.

With this election, Lorrin Cooke's real talent—leadership, began to develop. His fellow farmers had no way to get their produce to New York, so Lorrin worked with railroad

officials to route a train through the remote Colebrook area. Sales of Colebrook agricultural products rose dramatically as produce was freighted to the big city, and the town prospered. People began to see Lorrin Cooke as a man who could do things for Colebrook. Cooke's election to the Connecticut General Assembly as the representative from the Town of Colebrook took place in 1856, when he was only 25 years old. This one-year term in the Connecticut General Assembly gave him his first experiences in state politics.

In 1858 Cooke married Matilda E. Webster of Sandisfield, Massachusetts. She was the daughter of Abner S. and Mary (Alford) Webster. Lorrin and Matilda had no children, and Matilda Webster Cooke died in 1868. Two years later, Lorrin married Josephine Ward of Riverton, Connecticut, daughter of Michael and Sarah Ward. The couple had three children, Edward L., Ward, and Edna, though only their daughter Edna survived into adulthood.

After his term in the General Assembly ended in 1857, Cooke held various public offices at the town level. He was appointed as first selectman of Colebrook in 1865. That appointment was an honor, and he might have remained in Colebrook, serving the town as selectman for years to come, but in 1869, his life took a new direction. It was then that he was persuaded to take the job of manager of the Eagle Scythe Company in the municipality of Riverton, Connecticut in the Town of Barkhamsted. The company was in bad financial condition, but Cooke, with shrewd business insights and sound financial practices, pulled it out of the red. The company ran smoothly with Cooke as its manager, until it closed its doors in 1889.

Prominent people in Riverton soon noticed Cooke's business talents and his success with Eagle Scythe. In time, he overcame political opposition in the heartily Democratic town and was appointed postmaster while he was still working at Eagle Scythe. He served as postmaster for Riverton until November of 1881.

Working as postmaster and running Eagle Scythe gave Lorrin Cooke further training in leadership and administration. He ran for the Connecticut Senate in 1882 in the 18<sup>th</sup> District, and won in every town except his strongly Democratic Connecticut hometown, Colebrook. The new senator served well, being appointed to the committee on education, and impressing his colleagues with his efforts in that cause. Cooke's senate work during his first term was so good that he was re-elected in 1883 against a strong Democratic opponent.

Cooke's second term in the Connecticut Senate found him advancing politically. He was elected President Pro Tempore of the Connecticut Senate in 1884, and was said to preside with "fairness and dignity". His increased responsibilities included the chairmanship of the committee on engrossed bills, which made sure that bills originating from the Senate had fulfilled all legal and technical requirements. He also served on a committee that investigated certain aspects of the Connecticut Agricultural College.

His outstanding work in the Connecticut Senate earned Cooke a Republican nomination for lieutenant governor in 1885, running with Henry B. Harrison for Governor. The team won, and had a successful two-year term. Further honors came to Cooke in 1892, when he was appointed to be a delegate to the Republican National Convention in

Minneapolis, Minnesota. In 1895, he was elected a second time as lieutenant governor of Connecticut.

Lorrin Cooke's four years of being lieutenant governor, his talents, and his background of previous service caused him to be nominated as the Republican candidate for governor of Connecticut in 1897. He was elected by an overwhelming majority, earning 108,807 votes compared to 56,524 votes for his Democratic opponent James Sargent. This was the most votes any candidate had ever received before, or would receive, until 1916. He was also the first Connecticut governor since Charles Pond (elected in 1853, over 40 years earlier) to move directly from the position of lieutenant governor to the governorship.

Cooke brought to the governorship a background in business and agriculture. His business experience in making the Eagle Scythe Company fiscally solvent especially proved useful. When Cooke began his term as governor, the state's financial condition was not good. Reducing the budget was one of Cooke's primary goals. He soon persuaded lawmakers to cut expenses in areas where spending was extravagant. The finances of Connecticut did well under his guidance, even though the Spanish-American War required the state government to share the costs of that conflict with the federal government. Under Cooke, Connecticut sent two regiments of troops to the Spanish-American War.

Lorrin Cooke moved to Winsted, Connecticut, while he was governor. When his term ended, he returned there. He was active in religious and social causes the rest of his life. He was a member of the Society of Sons of the American Revolution.

Lorrin Cooke died on August 12, 1902, at age 71. He is buried near the family members that preceded him in the Center Cemetery of Colebrook. His second wife, Josephine, and his daughter Edna survived him.

The house that Cooke built in Riverton stands next to the Post Office there and has a marker next to its front steps. His Winsted house also still exists. Both homes are privately owned.

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## **PORTRAIT**

Charles N. Flagg painted a portrait of Governor Cooke in 1898. The portrait is 44" x 52" in its frame.

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