

William Hale Thompson

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William Hale Thompson



41st & 43rd^[1] [Mayor of Chicago](#)

In office

April 18, 1927 – April 9, 1931

Preceded by [William Emmett Dever](#)

Succeeded by [Anton Cermak](#)

In office

April 26, 1915 – April 16, 1923

Preceded by [Carter Harrison, Jr.](#)

Succeeded by William Emmett Dever

Member of the [Cook County Board of Commissioners](#)

In office
1902–1904

[Chicago Alderman](#) from the 2nd Ward^[2]

In office
1900–1902

Personal details

Born May 14, 1869
[Boston, Massachusetts](#),
U.S.

Died March 19,
1944 (aged 74)
[Chicago, Illinois](#), U.S.

Political party [Republican](#)

Spouse Mary Walker Wyse

(m. 1901)

Signature



William Hale Thompson (May 14, 1869 – March 19, 1944) was an American politician who served as [mayor of Chicago](#) from 1915 to 1923 and again from 1927 to 1931. Known as "**Big Bill**",^[3] he is the most recent [Republican](#) to have served as mayor of [Chicago](#). Historians rank him among the most unethical mayors in American history, mainly for his open alliance with [Al Capone](#).^[4] However, others recognize the effectiveness of his political methods and publicity-oriented campaigning, acknowledging him as a "Political [Chameleon](#)" and an effective political machine.^[5] [Time magazine](#) said in 1931, "chief credit for creating 20th Century Politics Chicago Style" should go to William Thompson.^[6]

Thompson was known for his over-the-top campaigning and uncensored language that, along with his towering height and weight, earned him the nickname "Big Bill".^[7] Upon [his reelection in 1919](#), Thompson had the school board [suspend](#) the [Superintendent of Chicago Public Schools](#), [William McAndrew](#). He was also at the forefront of the movement for the [Chicago Public Library](#) system and education officials to censor and ban many texts and historical recollections coming from the United Kingdom.^[8]

Though Thompson was a popular figure, his popularity collapsed after his death, when two safe-deposit boxes

were found in his name containing over \$1.8 million (\$28.3 million today) in cash and bonds.^[7]



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Early life^[edit]

Thompson was born in [Boston, Massachusetts](#) to William Hale and Medora Gale Thompson, but his family moved to Chicago when he was nine days old.^[9] Despite having been born in Boston, Thompson had strong roots in Chicago. His father, Colonel William Hale Thompson Sr., was a popular businessman within Chicago and had served as colonel in the Second Illinois Guard who had come to Chicago after serving in the [United States Navy](#) during the [American Civil War](#). His maternal grandfather, Stephen F. Gale, the first

chief of the [Chicago Fire Department](#), had played a large part in drawing up the city's corporation charter in 1837, earning him regard as a "Chicago pioneer" by some academic journalists.^[10]

Thompson attended [Chicago Public Schools](#), and took supplementary courses at the [Fessenden School](#) and Metropolitan College.^[11]

Thompson was meant to attend Yale but instead moved to Wyoming at the age of 14, where he became a cowboy and cattle owner and traveled across Europe, taking up ranching in Texas and New Mexico later on in his life. The experiences influenced him to add Western touches into his campaign, including his [sombrero](#), which became a symbol for his campaign. By the age of twenty-one, he had accumulated a stake of \$30,000. He returned to Chicago in 1892 after his father's death to manage his estates. Shortly after returning to Chicago, Thompson joined the Illinois Athletic Club and the Sportsmen's Club of America and quickly was appointed director-general and captain of the [water polo](#) and [football](#) teams. His six-foot frame and athletic prowess earned him the nickname "Big Bill," which stuck with him throughout his career as a politician.^{[5][12]}

Early career^[edit]



Thompson circa 1900

Thompson served on the Real Estate Board of Chicago.^[11]

In 1900, Thompson narrowly won election as an alderman on the [Chicago City Council](#) from the 2nd Ward, his home district.^[13] Two years later, he became a member of the [Cook County Board of Commissioners](#), serving from 1902 through 1904.^[14] During this period, Thompson formed a political alliance with [Frederick Lundin](#), a Republican city clerk who worked under [William Lorimer](#), a U.S. Representative from Illinois who was known for corrupt election methods. The political duo, according to most citizens, worked very well together earning them the title the "[Gallagher and Shean](#) of Chicago Politics". Thompson with his outgoing and charismatic personality paired with his towering stature and gentlemanly appearance gave him an undeniable public presence, which was completed by Lundin's cunning political ideas and projects.^[12]

First mayoralty (1915–1923)^[edit]

First term^[edit]



Thompson during his 1915 mayoral campaign

In 1915, Thompson was elected as the 41st Mayor of Chicago, beating County Clerk Robert M. Sweitzer, John H. Hill, Seymour Steadman, and Charles Thompson.

Thompson was sworn-in on April 26, 1915.^[15] In his inaugural address, Thompson spoke of his ambitions for Chicago to become "the greatest in the world", but also that his acts as mayor should not be swayed by corruption. He also emphasized the importance of public safety (as enforced by the Chicago Police Department), the improvement of public transit, secure and permanently lowered gas prices, Chicago being allowed to have Home rule and more efforts being placed into Chicago's commercial interests in order to create jobs and improve the city's

economy. His efforts to expand and publicly improve the streets of Chicago earned him another nickname of "Big Bill the Builder". In his time as mayor, he oversaw the completion of the [Michigan Avenue link bridge](#), the Twelfth Street widening, and the extension and widening of [Ogden Avenue](#). Along with his big dreams for Chicago's geographical expansion, he wished for Chicago to expand politically and economically. He believed that Chicago should be able to enforce laws on their own terms, particularly without what he claimed to be the interference of [British government](#) or [totalitarian](#) rule. He ended his inaugural address by declaring,

I am a firm believer in the separation of the three coordinate branches of government – Executive, Legislative and Judicial – peculiar to our American system, and that one should not intrude upon or violate, the prerogatives of the other. I do not intend to exceed the rights and privileges of the executive nor transgress upon the legislative or judicial functions. I shall impartially execute the laws made by the proper legislative authorities and interpreted by the judiciary.^[16]

As Thompson entered the first term of his mayorship, he appointed Fred Lundin as chairman on the committee of [patronage](#).^[12] Early in his mayoral career, Thompson began to amass a war chest to support an eventual run for the presidency, by charging city drivers and inspectors \$3 per month.^[citation needed]

Early in his mayoralty Thompson had to cut short a July 1915 trip to [San Francisco](#) in order to deal with the aftermath of the [Eastland disaster](#).^[17] While Thompson was out of town, acting-mayor Moorhouse had turned the [Chicago City Hall](#) into a makeshift hospital for first aid and a morgue for bodies recovered from the tragedy.^[17] Once Thompson returned to Chicago he organized and heavily promoted a relief fund and ordered an investigation into the casual negligence responsible for the tragedy.^[17]

In 1915, a delegation of civic-oriented women, headed by [Mary McDowell](#), urged Thompson to appoint an well-qualified woman to the city's new office of "commissioner of public welfare". Thompson did appoint a woman. However, instead of a woman qualified by a public welfare background, he appointed Louise Osborn Rowe, a Republican Party worker and loyalist. Within a year of her appointment, Rowe was charged with operating a [kickback](#) scheme in the department, and was forced to resign in 1916. This post would remain vacant until the mayoralty of Thompson's successor.^[18]

Thompson gained national attention and condemnation for his neutral attitude toward the events of [World War I](#). By declining the visit of the French Mission to Chicago and refusing to control or act against anti-war or anti-conscription meetings, Thompson is "credited with characterizing Chicago as the sixth [German](#) city of the world," also earning the nickname "Kaiser" Bill

Thompson.^{[12][19]} Thompson sought to further endear himself to the city's German and [Irish](#) populations by positioning himself as anti-British.^[20] These facts later went on to hurt his chances in his [1918](#) U.S. Senate campaign.^{[12][19]}

In 1916, he became a member of the [Republican National Committee](#). He would continue to serve on the committee until 1920.^[14]

Second term^[edit]

Thompson was reelected mayor [in 1919](#), beating out Robert Sweitzer once again along with Adolph S. Carm, John Collins, [John Fitzpatrick](#), and [Maclay Hoyne](#). Thompson was said to have had control of the 75,000 [black](#) voters in his day. In his campaign he claimed to be an advocate for the people against public utility companies and the rich who avoided taxes. This inspired Thompson to enforce a five-cent streetcar fare to promote his campaign, which was also used to threaten the action of streetcar companies; he also sued the [Chicago "L"](#) when it tried to raise fares after the inflation caused by World War I.^[21] Eventually, however, despite his protests, the fare was raised to seven cents.^[citation needed]

In his second inaugural address on April 28, 1919, Thompson looked towards drastically expanding Chicago, saying that "Chicago is greater than some nations". This expansion included the extension and widening of streets to cross over more of the city, new

post offices, freight terminals, playgrounds, bridges, and more. Also, due to the rapidly changing city, Thompson proposed a zoning bill to regulate and create commercial, industrial, and residential areas. Among the other issues he claimed he would address were telephone prices and service quality, the expansion of the Chicago Police Department, jobs for returning soldiers, lowering the cost of living, and restoring the jobs of Public School representatives who were removed by the Supreme Court.^[22]

Early into his second term, the city dealt with the [Chicago race riot of 1919](#).

At the [1920 Republican National Convention](#) Thompson helped to block his one-time ally [Frank Lowden](#) from capturing the nomination.^[5]

Thompson declined to run for reelection in 1923 and he was succeeded by [William Emmett Dever](#). Thompson left office as Mayor on April 16, 1923.^[23]

Chairman of the Illinois Waterways Commission^[edit]

While out of office, Thompson was appointed chairman of the [Illinois Waterways Commission](#). He used his position to remain relevant in the media, involving himself in civic suits and campaigning for the Lakes-to-Gulf waterway project: to build a waterway from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. Promoting both the

project and himself, Thompson set off on a "scientific" expedition (to be extensively covered by the media), which he set off to the South Seas in order to find a tree-climbing fish on July 5, 1924. Attracting more attention, Thompson placed a \$25,000 bet on his success, but no one participated. ^{[12][24]}

Second mayoralty (1927–1931) ^[edit]

See also: [William Hale Thompson 1927 mayoral campaign](#), [1927 Chicago mayoral election](#), and [1931 Chicago mayoral election](#)



1927 "[America First](#)" political advertisement advocating isolationism and establishing emotional ties of Thompson with his Irish supporters by vilifying the United Kingdom, a close ally

Thompson ran again in 1927 during a citywide gang war, aiming to unseat his successor, William Dever. Always a flamboyant campaigner, Thompson held a primary-election debate between himself and two live rats which he used to portray his opponents. Pledging to clean up Chicago and remove the crooks, Thompson instead turned his attention to the reformers, whom he

considered the real criminals. According to Thompson, the biggest enemy the United States had was [King George V](#) of the United Kingdom. Thompson promised his supporters, many of whom were Irish, that if they ever met, Thompson would punch the king in the nose, or at other times, that he would arrest His Majesty.^[3] Upon his victory over Dever, Thompson's floating speakeasy, outwardly known as the Fish Fans Club, docked at [Belmont Harbor](#). It was flooded with his supporters, so many so that the boat itself sank beneath the weight.^[25]

In his inaugural address on April 18, 1927, Thompson addressed the importance of remedying crime in Chicago, saying,

Our new Superintendent of Police has my positive instructions to drive the crooks and thieves and lawbreakers out of Chicago in ninety days, so that the people, their homes and their property may again be secure.^[26]

Thompson expressed his desire to remove Superintendent [William McAndrew](#) from the public schooling system, and restore what he called the "true history of George Washington" while exposing "the treason and propaganda which insidiously have been injected into our schools and other educational institutions". He also went on to enforce other issues he had addressed in previous speeches, like the issue of public transit, playgrounds, and the general upkeep and

expansion of Chicago in an effort to aid property owners and increase residential income and revenue for the city as a whole. In August 1927, the [Chicago Board of Education](#), now under Thompson's influence after he appointed a number new members, voted to charge McAndrew with [insubordination](#) and lack of patriotism, suspending him pending [an administrative hearing held by the board](#). The administrative hearing would last months, and the Chicago Board of Education would find McAndrew guilty. The [Cook County Superior Court](#) would later void this decision.^[27]

[Al Capone](#)'s support was pivotal to Thompson's return to the mayor's office.^[citation needed] During Thompson's second term, the "[Pineapple Primary](#)" took place on April 10, 1928, so-called because of the hand grenades thrown at polling places to disrupt voting. The Pineapple Primary saw candidates backed by Thompson face [Charles Deneen](#) in the Republican [primary election](#). Another infamous instance of gang activity that took place during Thompson's third term was [St. Valentine's Day Massacre](#).

Thompson blamed [Ruth Hanna McCormick](#)'s lack of support for his loss at the [1928 Republican National Convention](#), and he returned the favor during her [1930 campaign](#) for the [United States Senate](#) by endorsing against her in the general election.^[28] Thompson had had a longstanding rivalry with the McCormicks. He intensely disliked [Robert R. McCormick](#) who published

the [Chicago Tribune](#). U.S. Senator [Medill McCormick](#) was the publisher's brother, and Ruth Hanna McCormick was Medill McCormick's wife.^[28]

Amid growing discontent with Thompson's leadership, particularly in the area of cleaning up Chicago's reputation as the capital of [organized crime](#), he was defeated in 1931 by Democrat [Anton Cermak](#). Cermak was an immigrant from [Bohemia](#), and Thompson used this fact to belittle him with ethnic slurs such as:

I won't take a back seat to that [Bohunk](#), Chairmock, Chermack or whatever his name is.

Tony, Tony, where's your pushcart at?

Can you picture a [World's Fair](#) mayor with a name like that?

Cermak replied, "He doesn't like my name...It's true I didn't come over on the [Mayflower](#), but I came over as soon as I could," which was a sentiment to which ethnic Chicagoans (especially its large Bohemian population) could relate, so Thompson's slurs largely backfired.^[29]

After Thompson's defeat, the [Chicago Tribune](#) wrote, For Chicago Thompson has meant filth, corruption, obscenity, idiocy and bankruptcy.... He has given the city an international reputation for moronic buffoonery, barbaric crime, triumphant hoodlumism, unchecked graft, and a dejected citizenship. He nearly ruined the property and completely destroyed the pride of the city. He made Chicago a byword for the collapse of

American civilization. In his attempt to continue this he excelled himself as a liar and defamer of character.^[29]

Thompson left office April 9, 1931.^[30]

Subsequent career^[edit]

In 1936, Thompson ran for the office of Illinois governor on the "Union Progressive" ballot line against Democratic incumbent Henry Horner and Republican nominee C. Wayland Brooks. He received only three percent of the vote. In 1939, Thompson ran in the Republican primary for mayor of Chicago and was soundly defeated by a 77% to 23% margin against future Governor Dwight Green.^[31]

Personal life^[edit]



Thompson's grave at Oak Woods Cemetery

In 1901, Thompson married Mary "Maysie" Walker Wyse, a secretary in his father's office. The two never had children.^{[32][19]}

Death^[edit]

William Hale Thompson died on March 19, 1944, at the [Blackstone Hotel](#) at the age of 74.^[33] He was buried in [Oak Woods Cemetery](#) in a solid bronze casket.

Despite the fact that many loved Thompson and enjoyed his various political antics, few people attended his funeral, and one reporter noted that there was not "a flower nor a fern to be seen".^[31]

Upon Thompson's death, two safe deposit boxes in his name were discovered to contain nearly \$1.84 million (\$28.3 million today) in cash.^{[34][35]} Once the money was uncovered, the Internal Revenue Service took their share in taxes, and Maysie Thompson lived off of the rest until her death in 1958.^[19]

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