

# James Francis Pendergast

Kansas City Alderman  
1856-1911

---

by Nancy J. Hulston

James F. Pendergast, born in 1856 in Gallipolis, Ohio, was the oldest of nine children. His family moved to St. Joseph, Missouri, when he was three years old. Jim moved to Kansas City in 1876 and worked in an iron foundry. In the early 1880s he purchased a saloon and a small hotel in the West Bottoms. Soon his brothers and sisters joined him to help with the business.

Big Jim's influence in the West Bottoms grew, and in 1884 he was elected as a delegate to represent the sixth ward in the Democratic City Convention. In 1887 he became the Democratic committeeman from the first ward. He was elected alderman in 1892 and gradually built a personal political organization within the Democratic Party.

Jim presented himself as an advocate for the common working man, which enhanced his political base. He helped people find jobs and provided coal and food to the needy. In 1894 Jim's brother Tom, the youngest of the Pendergast siblings, joined the family business in Kansas City. Jim moved Tom quickly into grassroots politics, teaching him how to get out the vote and how to steal elections.

Jim was interested in improving Kansas City and worked with William Rockhill Nelson and other Republican leaders to promote the 1893 City Beautiful Movement. One outcome of that movement was the opening of Union Station in 1914.

Jim served nine terms as alderman on the city council. After his wife's death in 1905, he began to lose interest in both business and politics. He left the council in 1910, and his brother Tom easily won the seat. Jim planned to retire to his farm in Johnson County, but his health failed rapidly. He died on November 10, 1911. The last person he asked to speak to before he died was his brother Tom, the heir apparent of the political machine that Jim Pendergast had created.



Sources

Dorsett, Lyle W. "Alderman Jim Pendergast." *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin* 21 (October 1964):3-16.

Larsen, Lawrence H. and Nancy J. Hulston, *Pendergast!* Columbia: University Press of Missouri, 1997.

Reggig, William M. *Tom's Town: Kansas City and the Pendergast Legend.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986.

© 1999