

Lincoln Lore

Bulletin of the
LINCOLN HISTORICAL RESEARCH
FOUNDATION

Louis A. Warren - - Editor

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LINCOLN'S FIRST VOTE

Abraham Lincoln cast his first vote on August 1, 1831, at the Clary's Grove precinct in Sangamon County, Illinois. He was then twenty-two years of age; and had recently come from Indiana. Aside from participating in the election as a voter, he assisted as a clerk, which gave him an insight into the political faiths of his friends and neighbors. The votes were recorded by the clerks after the voter had made his choice known, orally. Here, on the record of the election, was exhibited not only the voters names but the candidates for whom they voted. It is this method of procedure which allows us to learn the name of the man who received Abraham Lincoln's first vote.

The 1831 election was held for the purpose of electing a member of congress, from Illinois, and local magistrates and constables were also to be chosen. There were five candidates for congress: Joseph Duncan, Sidney Breese, Edward Coles, Alexander P. Field, and James Turney; eight candidates for magistrate: Robert Conover, Bowling Green, Lewis Ferguson, Pollard Simons, Edmund Greer, Peter Harvice, John C. Vance, James Pantier; eight candidates for constable: John Armstrong, C. Reynolds, Bennett Abell, James Rutledge, T. Hornback, James Berry, Henry Sinco, M. Brown.

As two magistrates and two constables were to be chosen from the candidates named, it left five men for Lincoln to select, including the candidate for congress. It is apparent that he did not vote until late in the election, as his name appears near the end of the list of 151 men who voted in the precinct. With our modern system of voting where there is no way of learning the vote until the poles are closed, the voter cannot be very greatly influenced by those who have voted before him. In the early days, the candidate who received a majority of the votes in the early part of the election had a distinct advantage. It took much courage for a man to vote for a candidate who had no hope of being elected, and one can imagine the banter which would greet the announcement of a vote for a candidate who was apparently out of the race.

Lincoln's first vote was cast for a candidate such as this. When asked his choice for congressman he pronounced the name of James Turney who had received but very few votes

in the precinct and the fewest of any of the five candidates in the final totals for the state.

CANDIDATES FOR CONGRESS

Of the five candidates for Congress, in 1831, whose names appeared on the Illinois election lists, four were at that time Democrats and one was a follower of Henry Clay and his Whig principles. The results of this election show how little the ideals of Clay had found expression in Illinois at this time, as each one of the four Democratic candidates polled more votes than James Turney, the Clay adherent. In a total of 24,188 votes, Turney received but 1,175. It is a significant fact that one of these votes was cast by Abraham Lincoln. In Lincoln's own county of Sangamon, Tunney received but 77 of a total of 1,839 votes. Joseph Duncan, the successful candidate, was born in Bourbon County, Kentucky. He had distinguished himself by his service in the war of 1812, and had been state senator from 1824-1826, elected as a Jackson Democrat in the twentieth and twenty-first Congress, and was now successful in his election to the twenty-second Congress. Sidney Breese, another candidate, was born in New York State, was a United States District Attorney in 1825, and a well known political leader. Edward Coles, another candidate, was of the Jefferson school and was a Virginian aristocrat, yet opposed to slavery. He had been Governor of Illinois. Alexander Field, the fourth of the Democratic candidates, had served for several terms in the state legislature as a representative from Johnston County.

It is immaterial to this discussion that two of the above men changed their political faith in after years and two of them subsequently enjoyed some degree of national eminence. These facts could not have influenced the vote of Abraham Lincoln in 1831.

James Turney, for whom Lincoln cast his first vote, had served in several state offices, once having been elected to the Lieutenant Governorship. He lived in Green County and there is no evidence that he was personally known to Lincoln. It is said that, in later years, he also changed his political viewpoint.

When Lincoln chose to cast his vote for Turney at the election in 1831, it is evident that but one motive moved him and that was his belief in the principles of Henry Clay. Surrounded as he was on every side by Jacksonian Democrats, it does not appear that the first vote he cast for the hopelessly beaten Clay candidate was what one might call a popular choice.

CANDIDATES FOR MAGISTRATE

When Lincoln was asked to name his choice for magistrate in the elec-

tion of 1831, he was confronted with the problem of selecting two out of a field of eight. It is evident that he did not allow his political preferences to interfere with his vote in the choice of local officers. One of his two votes was cast for Bowling Green, the outstanding man of the community and the leading Democrat in that part of the county. As Green was one of the two successful candidates he proved to be the first winner which Lincoln had voted for in a political race. The other candidate for magistrate who received his vote was Edmund Greer who was hopelessly beaten.

Bowling Green in after years became one of Lincoln's closest friends and staunch supporters. His encouragement had much to do with Lincoln's entrance into politics. John Vance, another candidate for magistrate but one who failed to receive Lincoln's vote, shortly after this election, loaned Lincoln a copy of Kirkham's Grammar. Vance lived about six miles from New Salem.

CANDIDATES FOR CONSTABLE

Evidently the most difficult task which confronted Abraham Lincoln in the 1831 election was that of choosing two constables from the several candidates who were before the people. The two who received his vote were undoubtedly well known to him and the fact that both of these men were elected would suggest that he had voted for them because they were well qualified for the office. Their election might also suggest that they were not out of harmony, politically, with the majority of the voters who were Jackson Democrats.

Lincoln was to have a rather close association with John Armstrong, one of his choices for constable, in what is known as the famous wrestling match. Armstrong's great physical strength was undoubtedly his best qualification for the office which he succeeded in winning. In later years, it was a son of this same John Armstrong whom Lincoln defended in the famous murder case.

The other candidate to receive Lincoln's vote for constable was Henry Sinco who kept a store at New Salem. It is likely that Lincoln had assisted him in the store at intervals and, therefore, gave him his support.

It is interesting to note that two of the defeated candidates were closely associated with certain young ladies in New Salem with whom Lincoln is said to have been infatuated. James Rutledge, the father of Ann Rutledge, and Bennett Abell, a brother-in-law of Mary Owen, were both candidates for constable but Lincoln as early as August 1, 1831, was not bidding for the favor of either of the two young ladies. Had he been, his vote for constable might have been influenced.