

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 952

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

July 7, 1947

LINCOLN'S FIRST APPEARANCE ON THE NATIONAL POLITICAL STAGE

The River and Harbor Convention held in Chicago just one hundred years ago this week on July 5, 6, and 7, 1847, was a gala occasion in the calendar of Abraham Lincoln's early political experiences. It is impossible to think of a public meeting which was of more importance in his development as a Whig, and later as a Republican leader, than this Chicago assembly of America's leading statesmen.

The calling of this convention was indirectly due to the veto by President Polk of a congressional bill which would have appropriated government funds for the improvement of rivers and harbors. The bill was vetoed by the President on December 15, 1846, and it immediately brought about a showdown between the two schools of thought with respect to the construction which should be placed upon the Constitution in relation to financing internal improvements. One group headed by the President was known as the "strict" constructionists and their opponents as the "loose" constructionists. It was nothing more than the age long struggle between conservatives and liberals. Polk commented that he did not think the Constitution "conferred upon the federal government the power to construct works of internal improvement."

The convention was really a remonstrance gathering organized for the purpose of giving a public hearing on the question and especially to put on a demonstration which would acquaint the President with the prevailing sentiment of the people towards his veto. The most dissatisfaction with the President's veto came from the region of the Great Lakes where local authorities were unable to develop an adequate harbor program. The fact that Buffalo was the home of the chief sponsor of the convention and the further timely selection of Chicago as the place of meeting brought together all of the shipping interests dependent on the great bodies of inland waters and the rivers flowing into or out of them. One other important factor was introduced which represented the River interests, Edward Bates of St. Louis was made the chairman of the meeting. With Mr. William Moseley Hall, an eastern man of Buffalo the promoter of the convocation, and a western man the convention chairman together with the selection of Chicago as the place of meeting, everything was set for a tremendous celebration to begin the day after the glorious fourth of July which came on Sunday.

Wherever possible delegates used methods of transportation available on lake and river. Lake steamers brought to Chicago great crowds from Buffalo, Niagara, Cleveland, Detroit, and Milwaukee and these were supplemented by crafts plying the western rivers. However, thousands of delegates came over the western trails. Several stage lines into Chicago were already in operation including a daily coach between Detroit and Chicago. The Peoria stage from the south took about forty-eight hours and at best three days must be allowed for the trip from Springfield, the state capital.

On June 24, 1847, Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to Orville H. Browning in which he remarked in a brief line: "I am preparing to attend the Chicago River and Harbor Convention." He must have left about July 1 in order to reach there for the opening session and with an equal amount of time for the return trip must have been away for at least ten days. This was probably Lincoln's first visit to the city of Chicago.

Somehow the full significance of this gathering has not been emphasized by those who have told the story of Lincoln's early years in Illinois. The colorful spectacle really served as a stereoscope through which the east was able to look from a true and hitherto unobserved perspective at the vast economic possibilities of the west. Horace Greeley in his New York Tribune refers to the convention as the largest meeting that ever gathered in America. Some estimates of the number present are placed at 25,000 although Chicago itself at that time had a population of but 16,000.

Previous to the first session of the convention on Monday, July 5, a mammoth parade was formed at 9:30 in the morning in which most of the delegates participated. Naval units, military groups, fire companies, musical organizations, etc., helped to give color to the occasion. Lincoln marched as one of the three delegates from Sangamon County.

Here at Chicago Lincoln met many of the nation's outstanding political leaders and especially men well known in the Whig party. Such names as Greeley, Weed, Bates, Colfax, Bebb, Corwin, Stewart, and Field now became attached to personalities whom Lincoln would not soon forget. We are also convinced that there were many of the political leaders who looked forward to meeting Lincoln. Inasmuch as he was the newly elected Congressman from the only Whig district in Illinois, acquaintances made here would not make him a stranger when he arrived in Washington several months later.

The great climax of Lincoln's experience at the Convention came on Tuesday morning, July 6, when he was invited to reply to an opposition speech made by one of Polk's staunchest supporters, the Hon. David Dudley Field, then recognized as "the most commanding figure at the American bar." Horace Greeley took notice of Lincoln's reply and made this comment in his news report: "Hon. Abraham Lincoln, a tall specimen of an Illinoian, just elected to Congress from the only Whig district in the State was called out and spoke briefly and happily in reply to Mr. Field."

We do not have preserved the speech that Mr. Lincoln gave but we can be assured that he was very familiar with a subject which had formed the nucleus of most of his political discussions since his first address on the navigation of the Sangamon River. If Lincoln had left a calendar of "Red Letter Days" in his own experience, it is very certain that the dates of the Chicago River and Harbor Convention would be included.