

LINCOLN LORE

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MENTOR FOR EARLY REPUBLICANS

Steps to the Wigwam, No. 2

When Abraham Lincoln visited Massachusetts on behalf of the Whig candidate for President in September, 1848, he witnessed the beginning of the disintegration of the Whig Party. His own defeat in Illinois as a Whig candidate for the Senate by an anti-Nebraska Democratic candidate in January, 1855, left no doubt in his mind but what the Whigs were through as a great national party.

The political prestige which Lincoln had built up for himself, in magnanimously turning over his delegates to Trumbull in the Senatorial contest in 1855, was greatly enhanced in 1856 by another personal withdrawal of self, for the sake of the newly organized party. The delegates to the conference from the press were given a dinner at the Cassell House and Lincoln was the principal speaker. This was his first appearance as a spokesman for the movement to bring together the various political elements opposed to the Nebraska bill. His leadership was recognized by the proposal according to Selby that he be nominated for governor but observes that Lincoln responded that it would be "nothing more than an attempt to resurrect the dead body of the old Whig party. I would secure the vote of that party and no more, and our defeat will follow as a matter of course." Lincoln then suggested that if Col. William H. Bissell were nominated he would secure enough anti-Nebraska Democrat votes and enough Whig votes to win the contest, and so it proved in the next election.

Lincoln wrote on August 24, 1855 to his friend of long standing, Joshua Speed, stating, "I think I am a Whig; but others say there are no Whigs, and that I am an abolitionist." He was just then in the transition period of his first political party transformation. In less than six months he appeared by invitation as the mentor for anti-slavery men in Illinois who had become greatly agitated over the Nebraska question, with the result that he was primarily responsible for the essential characteristics of the new party called Republican.

The repeal of the Missouri Compromise was the generator setting in motion the new political vehicle, which eventually was to crush out the anticipated extension-of-slavery program. Whether or not Lincoln was an abolitionist is a matter of interpretation but there was no question about his stand on the Nebraska question.

It was not until January, 1856, that a movement to coordinate those opposed to the Nebraska Bill was successfully undertaken. It was sponsored by the Illinois newspaper editors, with Paul Selby, the thirty-one year old editor of the *Morgan Journal* at Jacksonville, taking the initiative. The appeal called for a meeting of the editors at Decatur for February 22.

The call for the convention read as follows:

"All editors in Illinois opposed to the Nebraska bill are requested to meet in convention at Decatur, Illinois, on the 22d of February next, for the purpose of making arrangements for the organization of the Anti-Nebraska forces in this state for the coming contest. All editors favoring the movement will please forward a copy of their paper containing their approval to the office of *The Illinois State Chronicle*, Decatur."

The names of the editors of the following papers were affixed to the call as avowed supporters of the project:

The Morgan Journal, Jacksonville; *The Chronicle*, Winchester; *The Illinois State Chronicle*, Decatur; *The Quincy Whig*, Quincy; *The Pike County Free Press*, Pittsfield; *The Gazette*, Lacon; *The Tribune*, Chicago; *The Staats Zeitung*, Chicago; *The Republican*, Oquawka; *The Republican*, Peoria; *The Prairie State*, Danville; *The Advertiser*, Rock Island; *The Fultonian*, Vermont, Fulton County; *The Journal* (German), Quincy; *The Beacon*, Freeport; *The Pantagraph*, Bloomington; *The True Democrat*, Joliet; *The Telegraph*, Lookport; *The Gazette*, Kankakee; *The Guardian*, Aurora; *The Gazette*, Waukegan; *The Chronicle*, Peru; *The Advocate*, Belleville; *The Journal*, Chicago; *The Journal*, Sparta.

A bad storm, as well as a hesitancy to come out publicly on the slavery issue, cut down the attendance of editors to not more than a dozen. However, they went forward with their organization plans.

Selby urged that Lincoln find it convenient to be in Decatur on the day proposed that he might be consulted on certain controversial questions which it was known would arise. Mr. Lincoln was on hand and according to Selby was in constant touch with the Resolutions Committee throughout the day. Selby also stated that the conclusions of the committee "had the stamp of his (Lincoln's) peculiar intellect." The main arguments in the platform set forth by the resolution committee are analyzed by Selby in this language:

"The platform, while disavowing any attention to interfere in the internal affairs of any state in reference to slavery, reduced to its first elements, amounted to an emphatic protest against the introduction of slavery into territory already free, or its further extension; demanded the restoration of the Missouri Compromise; insisted upon the maintenance of the doctrine of the Declaration of Independence as essential to freedom of speech and of the press, and that, under it, 'Freedom' should be regarded 'as the rule and slavery as the exception, made and provided as such—and that it nowhere recognizes property in man as one of its principles;' declared in favor of the widest toleration in matters of religion and for the protection of the common school system—which was a protest against 'Know—Nothingism' which had swept over the country within the proceeding two years—and concluded with a demand for 'reform in the administration of the state government' as second only in importance to the slavery extension itself."

Possibly the most far reaching business of the conference was the passing of the following resolution:

"Resolved, That this convention recommend a state delegate convention to be held on Thursday, the 29th day of May next, in the city of Bloomington, and that the state central committee be requested to fix the ratio of representation for that convention, and take such steps as may seem desirable to bring about a full representation from the whole state."

When one views the entire proceeding of the Decatur Editor's Convention and observes Lincoln's behavior from the time of its inception to its close, he must be convinced that there was little or nothing of an accidental nature that occurred. The success of the enterprise was the result of careful planning in which Lincoln had no small part. There is no doubt but what Lincoln came out of the Decatur editors' convention as the mentor of the young Republican Party.