

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN VS. CARTWRIGHT CONGRESSIONAL CAMPAIGN

The first installment of a three volume work by Sidney and Marjorie Barstow Greenbie is just off the press. It is entitled *Hoof Beats to Heaven* and the sub-title states that the story is "A true chronicle of the life and times of Peter Cartwright, circuit rider." We anticipate that one of the subsequent volumes will give some attention to the Lincoln vs. Cartwright contest for congress. Having developed in preceding issues of *Lincoln Lore*, Lincoln's political advancement as a leader of his party, it seems proper to bring the series to a close with some comments on the congressional race for the seventh district of Illinois in 1846. This victory was the climax of Lincoln's experience as an Old Line Whig.

The many differences in appearance and personality between Lincoln and Douglas in the 1858 senatorial contest have been given much attention but there seems to be no such vivid portraits of the candidates who confronted each other in this political battle a dozen years earlier. Size was a primary factor in a comparison of the 6 ft. 4 in. Lincoln and the 5 ft. 4 in. Douglas. Age was the chief point of physical contrast between the railsplitter and the presiding elder. The former was thirty-seven years old, and the latter sixty-two. Cartwright was nearly twenty-five years Lincoln's senior, old enough to be his father. In fact eight years before Abraham was born in Kentucky, Peter had been licensed as a religious exhorter in the same state.

Lincoln is said to have first met Cartwright shortly after arriving in Illinois at the home of a Mr. Brown at Island Grove when Cartwright was campaigning for the Illinois Legislature. William Butler is responsible for the story that at that time Lincoln engaged Cartwright in a political discussion and that the preacher was "astonished at the close reasoning" of Lincoln. Cartwright lived at Pleasant Plains but ten miles from New Salem where he often preached. During the several years that Lincoln lived in the community he must have come to know the elder very well.

There were in reality two political contests in which Lincoln and Cartwright were opponents. One was won by the preacher and the other by the lawyer. Cartwright announced as a candidate for the Illinois Legislature in 1826 but failed to gain a seat. He was successful in 1828 however, but in 1830 although a candidate, ran fifth in a race where but three were chosen. Announcing again in 1832 when four were to be elected he was one of thirteen candidates, among them Abraham Lincoln. This time Cartwright came in fourth and was elected, having nine more votes than his closest competitor. Lincoln ran eighth with 138 votes less than the clergyman.

Cartwright did not announce for the biennial contest in 1834 when Lincoln was elected so they never served in the legislature at the same time. At a special election for senator in the general assembly in 1835 Cartwright was a candidate but was defeated. When they were brought together in the congressional campaign in 1856, Lincoln representing the Whigs and Cartwright the Democrats, both had served their political apprenticeships in the Illinois Legislature. It is to be regretted that none of the speeches of Lincoln and Cartwright in the 1846 campaign have been preserved. Although differing considerably in appearance and in age, Lincoln and Cartwright were much of the same mind politically although one was a Whig and the other a Democrat.

On the slavery question which was just then coming into prominence as a political issue, they were in agreement. Lincoln claimed his father left Kentucky "partly on account of slavery" and Cartwright writing that he came to Illinois "to get entirely clear of the influence of slavery." Yet neither one of them could be classified as an abolitionist.

At the session of the general conference of the Methodist Church at New York in 1844 Cartwright was bitterly opposed to the southern group of the church seceding from the parent body, however his four Illinois convention associates approved of the measure. His position here was not unlike Lincoln's attitude towards the secession of southern states. Both Lincoln and Cartwright were in agreement that slavery should not be disturbed in the states where it was entrenched. They both seemed to take the same view on the Mexican and Oregon questions and there did not appear to be any vital issue on which political discussion could be based.

It is accepted generally that the contest was one in which individual appeal was the primary factor and this of course invited personal comments which might be somewhat critical. One of the amusing charges of Cartwright from Lincoln's viewpoint was his being placed among the aristocrats. Not only the marriage to an aristocratic wife but the fact that Lincoln was an admirer of Henry Clay, allowed Cartwright to stress this social status. Cartwright being a great admirer of Jackson, it was a sort of Clay vs. Jackson contest with Lincoln the aristocrat and Cartwright the commoner.

The answer of Lincoln to one charge of a personal nature which Cartwright brought against Lincoln, is easily the feature of the campaign. Lincoln wrote to a friend during the campaign: "I was informed by a letter from Jacksonville that Mr. Cartwright was whispering the charge of infidelity against me in that quarter. I at once wrote a contradiction of it and sent it to my friends there." Lincoln learned later on that the same charge was being circulated in other communities so he decided to publish a hand bill in refutation of the accusation. This hand bill is the most valuable direct statement which Lincoln made with respect to his early religious beliefs.

The seventh district was normally a Whig district and this had as much to do with the result of the contest as any other factor. When the results of the election on August 3, 1846 were made known, Lincoln's majority over Cartwright was unprecedented. The percentage vote cast for Lincoln by counties follows: Cass, 53; Logan, 70; Marshall, 42; Mason, 53; Menard, 38; Morgan, 50; Putnam, 38; Sangamon, 64; Scott, 56; Tazewell, 63; Woodford, 41. It will be observed that Cartwright carried but three counties. The percentage vote cast for Lincoln in the entire district was 56. In 1843 Hardin running for the same office received 53% of the votes and Baker the candidate in 1844 polled 52% of the ballots cast. Hardin's majority was 873, Baker's 710, and Lincoln 1511.

It was at Petersburg, county seat of Menard County, where Abraham Lincoln was nominated for representative by the Whig convention and it is said that it was in Petersburg where Peter Cartwright, the famous circuit rider of the west, preached his last sermon.