

Lincoln Love

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“ELECTION-TIME IN AMERICA”: AN ENGLISHMAN’S VIEW OF POPULAR POLITICS DURING THE 1860 CAMPAIGN

By Matthew Noah Vosmeier

(continued from previous issue)

Political prints such as the ones the traveler saw in shop windows on Broadway were not the only products of American presidential campaigns that caught his attention. Perhaps as he picked up a copy of a New York newspaper, he was surprised by the commercial possibilities for campaign ephemera. Quoting from one for his readers, he noted that “everywhere advertisements meet your eye of this inflammatory kind”:

ROLL ON – ROLL UP!

Sixteen varieties of CAMPAIGN MEDALS, solid rim, with milled edge and gilt shell rim — medals containing beautiful mellainotype likenesses of

Lincoln and Hamlin,

Bell and Everett,

Douglas and Johnson,

Breckinridge and Lane,

MARK BARNEWITZ
and JONATHAN PUM-
NER, 38 and 40, WEST
FOURTH-STREET,
NEW YORK.

Upon reading this, he decided to go to see the store for himself. When he arrived to buy

these election badges, which are about the size of a five-dollar

gold piece, I find they bear on one side the likeness of the nominee for President, on the other the Vice-President, and are to be worn at the button-hole.

Although I could find no record of a shop in New York City owned by the proprietors the Englishman named, the campaign buttons with the “mellainotype” (also known as “ferrotype” or “tintype”) likenesses of Lincoln and Hamlin in Figure 1 appear to match those that the Englishman observed at the store. The Lincoln Museum has various styles and sizes of campaign buttons with ferrotype images. Like the ones the traveler saw, these have “milled” (or grooved) edges and are about the size of an 1860 five-dollar

gold piece, which was as small as a modern nickel. Overwhelmed by the ubiquitousness of these expressions of partisan loyalty, the Englishman told his readers that:

I have seen thousands wearing them; and since I have been in America, and indeed a week ago on the Alabama river, I met a well-known duelist with a little silver bell on his watch-chain: signifying thereby his changeless attachment to Mr. Bell, one of the candidates for the presidency. These election medals follow me everywhere — barefooted boys bring cigar-boxes full of them for sale, into the luxurious marble-paved smoking-rooms of the great hotels; lean dried-up men hawk them through the long avenues of the railway-cars, and awake me to recommend

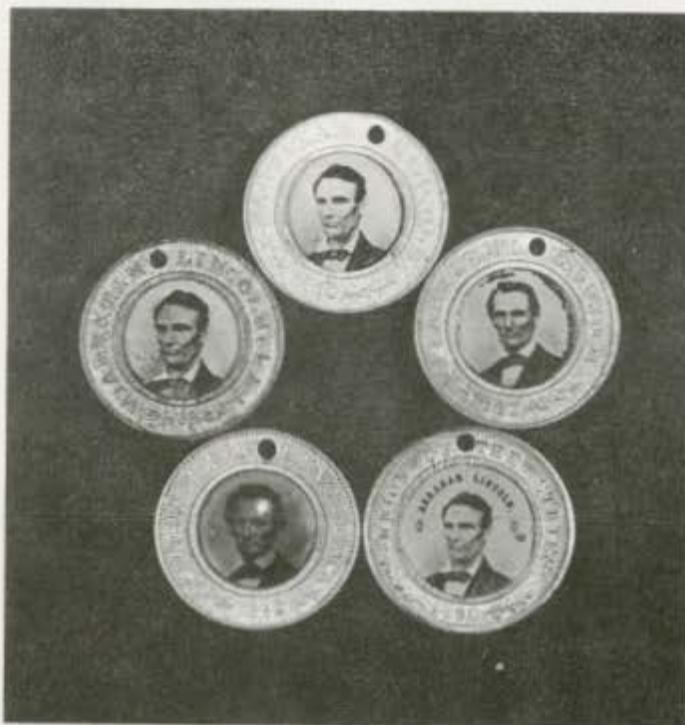


Figure 1. Campaign buttons from 1860 with ferrotypes of Abraham Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin (on reverse). At top, lower right, and upper left are variants of a photograph (O-14) probably taken in 1858 by Roderick M. Cole of Peoria, Illinois. At upper right and lower left are variants of the Brady Cooper Union photograph of February 1860 (O-17). These are discussed in Charles Hamilton and Lloyd Ostendorf's *Lincoln in Photographs*, pp. 28-29, 37.



Figure 2. Campaign ribbon from the presidential election of 1860.

in it." [Figures 2 and 3]

The traveler could not escape popular political expression even at his lodgings, the St. Nicholas Hotel, on Broadway between Broome and Spring Streets. In the book *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New-York* (1869), Junius Henri Browne explained that the St. Nicholas was a popular and elaborately furnished hotel, if "given to show and something nearly resembling tawdriness," with "the halls, and saloon, and reading-room ... [resembling] a human beehive, and the sidewalk in front of the building ... so crowded with loungers that it is difficult to pass." In 1869, Browne observed that, until recently, Southerners had shown a preference for staying at the St. Nicholas (pp. 393-394). The Englishmen noticed similar things at the hotel in the fall of 1860:

I have heard for the last two hours the gentlemen rocking in the chairs outside the door of the St. Nicholas Hotel, in Broadway, discussing the [ox]

their medals and their "plum candy;" the shops have trays of them in their windows; you can almost tell in different cities how the voting is likely to go, by the majority of medals you meet, being either "Lincoln" or "Douglas."

As if the button-sellers were not enough, he reported being pestered by "the book-stall keepers in the halls of the hotels, and at the railway stations, [who] tease me with portraits of 'the rail-splitter,' or 'the Union candidate,' printed in broad blue on crimson ribbons; and when these do not confront me the man next me, in the train or coach, is sure to be laughing grimly over 'The Republican' or 'The Democratic Campaign Songster,' price ten cents, with all the new election ballads



Figure 3. A Republican songster published in Cincinnati for the 1860 election.

roast as they roll and bite their cigars. They cherish an angry hatred of Lincoln, for most of them are Cuban sugar-planters, or gentlemen of property from Louisiana, and wear sumptuous watch-chains at their fobs three inches broad.

The traveler wrote that, readying himself to go to the Democratic party ox roast at Jones's Wood, he stepped into the hotel saloon, ordered his first mint julep, and pondered the events going on around him. He recalled the previous night, and reported that, just as had retired for the evening, he had been drawn to his window by a commotion outside. In an imaginative description of political ritual, he described the scene outside his window:

An enormous Kentucky ox was borne on a scaffold past my window, surrounded by torches; his great shadow loomed like that of the Bull of Phalaris on my bedroom wall, luminous just then with a fiery storm of political fireworks. Somebody addressed the crowd all night long from the hotel balcony in the next room ..., then five brass bands struck up "Yankee

Doodle," and four cannon saluted the heaven from the Fifth Avenue every ten minutes, for an hour. And all this was to advertise the Ox-Roast at two o'clock today in Jones's Wood. 7

Such was not the only announcement of this kind, apparently, for the *New York Tribune* reported on September 11 that:

The friends of Douglas sent two advertising wagons about the streets on Monday morning. The first one contained a drummer and six blowers on brass, who heralded the approach of the second. This was drawn by 4 horses tandem and contained a pied ox who did not appear to feel very comfortable. At the side of the wagon appeared the following words in large letters:

"DOUGLAS BARBEQUE"

ON WEDNESDAY, 12th, AT JONES'S WOODS
KENTUCKY OX TO BE ROASTED (p. 7)

The story of the Douglas ox roast (and the disorderly behavior that followed at the barbeque pit) provided the traveler with a political event that could be told in a lively and humorous style that *All the Year Round's* editor Charles Dickens favored.⁸ In fact, the traveler liked the story well enough that it comprises nearly two-fifths of the article. However, the traveler's recounting of the Douglas barbeque does not exhibit the eyewitness quality of his detailed descriptions of New York City and of campaign ephemera. If he attended the celebration, he did not rely only on his memory of the remarkable happenings there. He also drew on and embellished the *New York Herald's* account. In any case, his story of the ox roast was well chosen for his article. When matched with his account of a Wide Awake parade, it effectively illustrates some of the variety of nineteenth-century popular politics.

The occasion for the barbeque was the arrival of the Democratic presidential and vice-presidential candidates, Stephen A. Douglas and Herschel V. Johnson, to New York City. Douglas had just completed a campaign tour of the border states, and, losing his voice to hoarseness, checked in at the Fifth Avenue Hotel on September 10, "for a few days of rest." Johnson joined him the next day to discuss the campaign. The Democratic party had recently lost the state elections in Vermont and Maine, and Democrats were searching for ways to unite Lincoln's opposition. On Wednesday, September 12, Douglas and Johnson spoke at Jones's Wood.⁹

According to a Douglas Central Campaign Club announcement reprinted in the *New York Tribune* on September 11, the barbeque would begin at noon, when the 2200 pound Kentucky ox would be "served up in True Old-Fashioned Democratic style." Douglas and Johnson would begin speaking at two o'clock. To accommodate the crowds trying to get to Jones's Wood, the committee arranged for extra city railroad cars and passenger steam-

boats. At the park, the committee informed readers, "a large police force will be on hand to preserve order." (p.7)

When the traveler set out from his hotel, he remarked that New York's "air is very exhilarating," and that there was "always a breeze from the Hudson or the Bay" and a sky of "lively blue." He may have been commenting generally on the fall weather in New York during his stay, for the *Tribune* of the 14th noted that on the day of the barbeque, "almost a gale was blowing the whole day" and that the weather was "very cold" with a slight snowfall in the afternoon.

The *Herald's* account of the barbeque that appeared on September 13 considered the "enterprise, the movement, [and] the spectacle ... a stupendous success," but it did not put all those attending the barbeque in a positive light. It cynically described the dialogue and appearance of New Yorkers who attended the barbeque, and the Englishman tried to make entertaining use of these American caricatures for his class-conscious audience. Building on the *Herald* reporter's experiences, the Englishman described reaching the beginning of Bowery, climbing aboard the omnibus, and gliding away,

some fifty of us, though drawn only by two horses, up Third Avenue, all bound to "the Monster Democratic Rally and Grand Political Carnival." The car is full, not only on both seats, but with strange wild-looking men, of, I should say, no great landed property (unless you call dirt landed property), who stand up in the centre of the carriage, holding to the roof straps; both balconies outside, and even the very steps, are crowded. My democratic friends are not discussing politics, but beef. One says: "Sure I have gone without meat for two days, just to get an appetite for this affair. I mean to fill in enough now to last till Sunday." Another says he doesn't care what "the little giant" says, so he can get some of the Douglas beef. A third uses his toothpick freely, "to get all under weigh," as he playfully observes.

The traveler described the carnival atmosphere of Jones's Wood, on Manhattan's east side, opposite Blackwell's (now Roosevelt) Island:

There are large red apples, from New Jersey orchards — maple sugar cakes — cheap cigars. There is lager beer, as the fresh, light, frothy pleasant beer the Germans introduced into America is called. There is a man with the hair coming through his straw hat, selling "Douglas walking sticks," and ... further on, a ragged quick-eyed boy is pitching copper cents with all his might into a willow-pattern plate, crying, as he does so:

"Twenty-five cents, gentlemen, for every cent which stops in the plate; one cent for the throw, and twenty-five cents to the successful aimer."

(To be continued)

Notes

7. The peculiar allusion to the "Bull of Phalaris" refers to a bronze bull constructed by Phalaris, who, from c. 570-554 B.C., was the tyrant of Akragas (now Agrigento) on the southern coast of Sicily. [Gertrude Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology Folklore and Symbols* (New York, 1961), p. 1961; *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1971 ed., s.v. "Phalaris."
8. In fact, Dickens's youthful writing had shown an "awareness of political absurdities," explains Dickens scholar George H. Ford. While on the staff of the *Morning Chronicle*, Dickens had been sent to Edinburgh to report on a banquet given for the retiring prime minister, Earl Grey. When Grey did not arrive on time, an impatient dinner guest decided that

the best thing he could possibly do, would be to eat his dinner, while there was anything to eat. He accordingly laid about him with right good-will, the example was contagious, and the clatter of knives and forks became general. Hereupon, several gentlemen, who were not hungry, cried out "Shame!" and looked very indignant; and several gentlemen who were hungry cried "Shame!" too, eating, nevertheless, all the while, as fast as they

possibly could. In this dilemma, one of the stewards mounted a bench and feelingly represented to the delinquents the enormity of their conduct, imploring them for decency's sake, to defer the process of mastication until the arrival of Earl Grey. This address was loudly cheered, but totally unheeded; and this is, perhaps, one of the few instances on record of a dinner having been virtually concluded before it began. [Quoted in George H. Ford, "Charles Dickens," in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 21: 93-95]

9. Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York, 1973), p. 792.



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Courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington

Detail of an 1857 map of Manhattan, with Union Square (at the top of this map) and City Hall (at the bottom). The St. Nicholas Hotel was located on Broadway between Broome and Spring Streets (to the right of the large numeral 8 in the center of this map). The Wide-Awakes illustrated in the next issue of *Lincoln Lore* are shown marching down Broadway, "around the Park and up through City Hall Square."