

A NEGLECTED EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

A Paper Read Before the Union League Club of Aurora, Illinois, on Monday
Evening, February 12, 1923, by James Shaw.

It is well that the people of this country should assemble once a year at least to do honor to one of the noblest figures of whom history makes record. To Abraham Lincoln more than to any other one man, we owe an undivided country. What his wisdom, his patience and his unfaltering courage saved us from, we may see in distracted Europe, rent with implacable race hatreds and insane jealousies, and torn with unappeasable greed. If the rebellious States of the South had succeeded in establishing on this continent an independent government, we should have all the evils under which Europe is reeling, intensified and multiplied by the existence of conditions from which Europe is free. The conflict between free labor and slave labor, well described, as "an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces," would have brought on an almost continuous state of war, relieved only by periods of complete exhaustion.

The name of him who saved his country from such unspeakable calamities will, in the years to come, stand with the greatest names in history with the names of those men whom the world cherishes as great and beneficent rulers, as law-givers, and as the founders of great states. He will be honored as is Moses, who gave to his people the commandments that, after the lapse of five and thirty centuries, form the bed-rock of the moral systems that govern all civilized countries. His fame will equal that of Alfred, who laid surely and deeply the foundations of that state around which are grouped the commonwealths that make the British empire; or that of Charlemagne, who brought order out of chaos in western Europe, and paved the way for the erection of the great states of that continent.

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It is my purpose to tell you this evening, as briefly as I may, an episode in the life of Abraham Lincoln that I think all will agree must have had an important influence on his mental and spiritual development. The incident has strangely escaped the attention of his biographers, yet it is not unknown to close students of the early history of Illinois. It has been mentioned at some length by Mr. J. Seymour Curry of Evanston, in his "History of Chicago." It has been told by Dr. H. B. J. Cigrand, in articles contributed to the press. ~~XXXXX~~ Rev. Dr. William E. Barton has made mention of it in several historical addresses. But in the formal biographies of Lincoln, now something like three-score in number, no mention of this episode is made. I think, therefore, we are quite justified in calling it "neglected."

I.

This event in the life of Abraham Lincoln had its genesis in a message of President Polk, vetoing a bill that Congress passed in the summer of 1846. This bill made an appropriation of something like one and a third millions of dollars for the improvement of certain rivers and the construction of harbors on the great lakes. President Polk considered the bill unconstitutional. Hence the veto.

James Knox Polk was the eleventh President of the United States. He was the first "dark horse" to win a Presidential nomination. He was also the first beneficiary of the two-thirds rule. This was a device of the slave power, adopted by the Democratic national convention of 1832 to prevent the nomination of any candidate not acceptable to that interest. Martin Van Buren received an actual majority in the Democratic national convention of 1844, but his position in regard to the annexation of Texas was not satisfactory to the Southern wing of the party, and he could not compass the two-thirds necessary to nominate. Seven ballots were taken before Polk's name was mentioned. On the ninth ballot he received the vote of every delegate in the convention.

Mr. Polk was a man of pure character and respectable ability. He had served as Governor of Tennessee. For fourteen years he was a member of Congress, and for two terms he was Speaker of the House of Representatives. Polk was the only Speaker who ever attained the Presidency. In politics he was a disciple of President Jefferson and a devout follower of President Jackson.

From the time of the adoption of the Constitution, there had been sharp conflict in regard to the powers of the general government under that instrument. Two schools of political thought had sprung up. One school, called strict constructionists, held that Congress could exercise no powers except such as were specifically granted in the Constitution. The loose or liberal constructionists contended that Congress had the right and the power to enact any measure authority for which might reasonably be inferred from the language of the basic law. The strict constructionists were usually members of the Democratic party. The liberal constructionists were usually Federals or Whigs.

Yet party lines were not always rigidly drawn on this issue. The first wide departure from the theory of strict construction came when President Jefferson bought the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon. Jefferson was a high priest of strict construction. He held that the government which governs least is the best government. Logically, therefore, he was opposed to injecting into the Constitution any meaning or purpose that was not clearly expressed in the instrument. His ideas on the subject, however, were, on occasion, quite elastic. One of his biographers says: "Jefferson had a fair measure of respect for the Constitution, but he thought it might too often have the effect of fetters on the nation." And again the same biographer says: "If the will of the people was with him in an unconstitutional policy, which he believed to be sound, he would speak respectfully of the Constitution, but he would not hesitate to disregard it."

The truth of this estimate of the views of Jefferson in regard to the Constitution is seen in the course he pursued when it was proposed to purchase the Louisiana Territory. He was clearly of the opinion that the measure was unconstitutional. At first he thought it would be necessary to amend the Constitution, so as to authorize the purchase. But quick action was ~~not~~ imperative, ~~But quick action was necessary~~ and that idea was abandoned. The purchase treaty was entered into "by and with the advice and consent of the Senate," and the Congress appropriated the money that constituted the price.

This measure, unconstitutional though it was, both in theory and in fact, has come to be regarded as an act of the highest statesmanship. But for that purchase, the vast domain comprised in what was then known as the Louisiana Territory would have been wrested from France by the overwhelming ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ naval power of Great Britain, and we should have had in the Mississippi valley a powerful, unfriendly and possibly hostile neighbor.

Since the day of the Louisiana purchase, the strict construction theory of the Constitution has received many a severe shock. Alaska was purchased from Russia in 1867. The Hawaiian islands have been acquired. Texas has been annexed, and also other parts of old Mexico. Porto Rico and the Phillipines were obtained as the spoils of war, and have been governed as conquered provinces. The first Pacific Railroad was built by the aid of the nation's credit and the gift of immense tracts of land. The isthmus of Panama has been severed, and a canal connecting the two greatest oceans in the world has been built by the government of the United States at a cost equal to thirty times the price of the Louisiana Territory.

The Preamble to the Federal Constitution sets forth that that instrument was ordained and established, among other things, to "promote the general welfare." Perhaps we have reached that stage in our national development where any measure designed to effect that purpose will be regarded as constitutional.

But that point had not been reached in the days of President Polk. He was a strict constructionist of the straightest sect. His views are clearly expressed in the following extract from his veto message of 1846:

"The Constitution has not, in my judgment, conferred upon the Federal Government the power to construct works of internal improvement within the States, or to appropriate money from the treasury for that purpose. . . . The general proposition that the Federal Government does not possess this power is so well settled, and has for a considerable period been so generally acquiesced in, that it is not deemed necessary to reiterate all the arguments by which it is sustained. . . . It is not questioned that the Federal Government is one of limited powers. Its powers are such, and such only, as are expressly granted in the Constitution, or are properly incident to the expressly granted powers, and necessary to their execution."

It seems strange to us now that President Polk, a stickler for a narrow interpretation of the Constitution when it came to making improvements that would protect life and promote commerce, should have no scruples about acquiring and annexing territory that was obtained, practically, by conquest. But land hunger is a great and universal passion. It has produced countless wars, and, among individuals, has caused lawsuits without number. The passion is illustrated by the old farmer, who protested that he was not land greedy, all he wanted was whatever land "jined" him.

The passion is again illustrated by a legend told by the historian John Fiske. The legend runs that at a Fourth of July dinner given by Americans in Paris soon after the civil war, sundry toasts were proposed to the glory of the American nation, the leading theme of which was the territorial expansion of the country. "Here's to the United States," said the first speaker, "bounded on the north by the snow-clad dominion of Canada, on the south by the sun-lit waters of the Gulf, on the east by the stormy Atlantic, and on the west by the boundless Pacific." This sentiment elicited but slight applause. It offered nothing at all to the imagination. The second speaker said, "This is far too limited a view. We must look to the future for the glorious destiny that awaits our country. Here's to the United States, bounded on the north by the north pole, on the south by the south pole, on the east by the rising and on the west by the setting sun." This was received ~~by~~ with great applause. It did not seem that human imagination could assign greater dimensions to the country.

But there arose a third speaker, a very serious gentleman from the sun-kissed prairies of the far West.. "If we are to take into account the future," he said, "let us draw aside the veil, and view our country in the glory of its ripened perfection. I give you the United States as in the fullness of time it shall be, bounded on the north by the ~~XXXX~~ aurora borealis, on the south by the precession of the equinoxes, on the east by primeval chaos, and on the west by the day of judgment."

II.

Whether we regard the position of President Polk as logical or illogical, it is certain that his veto of the river and harbor bill of 1846 and the consequent defeat of the appropriation, caused a storm of protest to sweep over the country. The indignation was particularly intense in the regions tributary to the great lakes. That section was just beginning to receive the tide of westward flowing migration that soon became a flood. A very large portion of this migration came by way of the lakes. These great inland waters were without natural harbors. Vessels were compelled to take on and discharge cargo in open roadsteads, at great expense and no little peril of life. The demand for national aid in the construction of proper harbors on the lakes was therefore loud and insistent.

A number of devoted and interested citizens undertook to provide means by which this public feeling might be given voice. The prime mover in this work was one William Moseley Hall, then a resident of Buffalo. He traveled about the country, calling and addressing public meetings and civic bodies of various kinds, writing for the newspapers, and arousing public opinion by the usual propaganda methods. Mr. Hall's efforts resulted in the calling of a convention to be held at Chicago on July 5, 6 and 7, 1847.

The convention proved to be a success far beyond the hopes of its most enthusiastic projectors. Authentic accounts placed the number of people in attendance at 25,000. The number of accredited delegates was 5000. Chicago was then an ambitious, self-conscious little town of about 16,000 inhabitants. Of course a town of that size could not begin to properly care for such a number of visitors. Not a single line of railroad then entered Chicago, now the world's greatest railroad centre. Thousands came to the convention by ~~the~~ way of the lakes, by steamboat or sailing vessel. Other thousands came on foot, or on horseback, or by some sort of wheeled conveyance. A portion of the people in attendance obtained shelter at night under some roof. Thousands found quarters on the vessels that had brought them to the city. Other thousands were compelled to sleep in the streets, or camp on the open prairie.

If the convention was great in quantity, it was also high in quality. No assemblage had ever gathered in the West that surpassed it in the high character and solid ability of its membership. From New York came a group of eminent men: David Dudley Field, acclaimed by his

friends, and perhaps justly, "the most commanding figure at the American bar;" Horace Greeley, just rising into fame as the editor of the most influential newspaper the country has ever known; Thurlow Weed, one of the early political bosses, perhaps the best, and certainly the most famous of the tribe. From Ohio came the eloquent Tom Corwin, just elected to the United States Senate. Ohio also sent her Governor, William Bebb, and two or three former Governors. Missouri sent a numerous delegation, headed by Edward Bates, of St. Louis. From Indiana came Schuyler Colfax, a future Vice President. From Michigan, Iowa and Wisconsin came a host of actual and potential Governors, Congressmen and Judges.

Illinois had an immense representation in the convention. Kane County, with a population of probably less than 15,000, sent 77 delegates. Among them were John F. Farnsworth, of St. Charles, afterwards representative in Congress for many years; E. R. Allen and W. P. West, of Aurora; E. Wilcox and P. Sylla, of Elgin; John Van Nortwick, of Batavia; Luther Dearborn, of Geneva. Among the delegates from Kendall county was L. D. Brady, who afterwards moved to Aurora, and was one of the early Mayors of the city. Most of the counties in northeastern Illinois had large delegations. The Cook county delegation was headed by "Long" John Wentworth.

From Sangamon county came Abraham Lincoln. By conviction, and by party affiliation, Mr. Lincoln was a warm advocate of internal improvements. His interest in this convention must be measured by the time, trouble and expense it cost him to attend. He probably came to Chicago from Springfield on horseback, and the journey, with the return trip, and his stay in Chicago, must have occupied at least ten days.

One distinguished citizen of Illinois was conspicuous by his absence, Stephen A. Douglas. Mr. Douglas was naturally an internal improvement man. He had become a resident of Chicago in this very year, 1847, and he was deeply interested in the growth and prosperity of the city. Possibly he visioned its future greatness. He was the author of the bill chartering the Illinois Central Railroad, which gave to that corporation a land grant of enormous value. But Mr. Douglas had just been elected United States Senator, one of the youngest men that ever sat in that body. He was on good terms with the Polk administration, and perhaps he saw no reason to break with it, or even to impair his relations with it. He was achieving prominence in the councils of the Democratic party, but he was not then the assured leader that he became in the next ten years, when he broke with another democratic President, James Buchanan.

III.

in 1847 Lincoln was thirty-eight years old. He had served four terms in the lower house of the Illinois General Assembly. He had practiced law for about ten years, and was acquiring the reputation of a lawyer who knew well three things--the law, the Judge, and human nature. These qualifications had made him a very successful trial lawyer. In 1846 he had been elected to Congress, but had not yet taken his seat. His presence at the River and Harbor Convention was his first appearance on what was really a national stage. He there had an opportunity, as we shall see, to measure himself with men of national reputation. We cannot doubt that the event had a bearing on his mental development.

Lincoln was the only Whig Congressman elected in Illinois in 1846. That fact, of itself, gave him prominence. The Chicago Evening Journal, a Whig organ, recognized in the only Whig representative in Congress from Illinois a personage of importance. It welcomed him with enthusiasm to the city. "We expect much from him as a representative in Congress," it said. And it added, in the fine journalese of that day: "We have no doubt our expectations will be more than realized, for never was reliance placed in a nobler heart and a sounder judgment. We know the banner he bears will never be soiled."

E. B. Washburne, for many years representative in Congress from the Galena district, and the American minister to France during the Franco-Prussian war, has given us a picture of Lincoln as he appeared when attending the River and Harbor Convention. Washburne was a delegate to the convention, and in a magazine article published many years ago he set down his recollections as follows:

"I met Mr. Lincoln at the celebrated River and Harbor Convention at Chicago, held July 5, 6 and 7, 1847. His dress and personal appearance on that occasion could not well be forgotten. It was then for the first time I heard him called 'Old Abe.' Old Abe, as applied to him, seemed strange enough, as he was then a young man, only thirty-eight years of age. One afternoon several of us sat on the sidewalk under the balcony in front of the Sherman House. Among the number was the accomplished scholar and unrivaled orator, Lisle Smith. He suddenly interrupted the conversation by exclaiming, 'There is Lincoln on the other side of the street. Just look at Old Abe.' From that time on we all called him 'Old Abe.' No one who saw him can forget his

appearance at that time. Tall, angular and awkward, he had on a short-waisted, thin, swallow-tailed coat, a short vest of the same material, thin pantaloons, scarcely coming down to his ankles, a straw hat, and a pair of brogans, with woolen socks."

IV.

The River and Harbor Convention promptly organized on Monday, July 5. The sessions were held in an immense tent. Edward Bates, of Missouri, was elected President. The usual committees were appointed. On Tuesday, in the morning, ~~XXXXXX~~ letters from many distinguished men were read. Former President Van Buren, Henry Clay, Thomas Hart Benton, Silas Wright and many others sent letters commending the objects for which the convention had been called. The longest letter received was from Daniel Webster. The great expounder of the Constitution argued at great length, and in his customary stately style, the constitutionality of Congressional appropriations for internal improvements.

On that morning there was also considerable speech-making. Hon. Alexander T. Stewart, of Pennsylvania, made a vigorous plea for internal improvements. This brought out David Dudley Field, who made an adroit speech in favor of strict construction, and of such improvements only as might be consistent therewith. He denied the right of the Federal Government to improve the navigation of the Illinois river, since it runs through a single State only, but thought that seaboard ports might be improved at the expense of the national government. Mr. Field was an ardent democrat, and a firm supporter of the Polk administration. It may ~~XXX~~ fairly be inferred that he attended the convention with a view, if possible, of preventing any radical expression in favor of internal improvements. A President was to be elected in 1848, and the two great parties then dividing the country were already preparing for that contest. It would not do to permit a supposedly non-partizan convention to directly or even impliedly censure a Democratic administration.

Mr. Lincoln was called upon to answer Mr. Field. In his Tribune letter Mr. Greeley mentions this incident in this quaint way: "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." No report was made of

Statement

any of these speeches, but there is a tradition that Mr. Lincoln, in the course of his remarks, replying to Mr. Field's ~~remark~~ about the Illinois river, asked how many States the Hudson river ran through; and that Mr. Field explained that in his opinion Congress had no right to make appropriations for the improvement of a river above a port of entry. The convention, however, was clearly against him.

In the afternoon of that second day the committee on resolutions presented what might be called the platform of the convention. Thereupon the struggle between the strict constructionists and the liberal constructionists was on again. The first four planks of the platform declared in positive and unmistakable language that the Constitution was framed by practical men for practical purposes; that under the grant to Congress of power to "regulate commerce with foreign nations and among the States," that body became obligated by every consideration of good faith and common justice to cherish and increase" both foreign and domestic commerce; that this obligation had been recognized from the foundation of the government; and that "the principle has been most emphatically acknowledged to embrace the Western lakes and rivers by appropriations for various light-houses upon them, which appropriations have never been questioned in Congress as wanting constitutional authority." The fifth plank in the platform was in this language:

"That thus, by a series of acts which have received the sanction of the people of the United States, and of every department of the government under all administrations, the common understanding of the intent and objects of the framers of the Constitution in granting to Congress the power to regulate commerce has been manifested, and has been confirmed by the people; and this understanding has become as much a part of that instrument as any part of its most explicit provisions."

Mr. Field now renewed his attack on the theory of the liberal construction of the constitutional powers of Congress. He moved to strike out all in this plank after the word "people." The clause he objected to was certainly strong enough to satisfy the most rabid loose constructionist. It was like what Tom Benton called making "a stump speech in the belly of the platform." Even Horace Greeley thought Mr. Field's motion ought to have prevailed. But the convention was in no mood for moderation, or for mild statements of its views, and Mr. Field's motion was rejected.

The fifteen planks of the platform, with one slight amendment, were

then adopted as reported by the committee.

This practically closed the work of the convention. The last day was devoted to gathering up the odds and ends of business. The convention adjourned after listening to a powerful speech by the President, Mr. Bates, in which he returned thanks for the honor done him, a speech which, as Mr. Greeley said, "took the convention completely by surprise, so able, so forcible, and replete with the soul of eloquence."

V.

The River and Harbor Convention of 1847 is now an almost forgotten event, even in the State where it met and considered an important question of public policy. An official narrative of its proceedings is contained in a thin volume that is buried in obscurity in a few libraries. Abraham Lincoln, whose fame and work overshadowed the land in less than a score of years after the convention, has left no record of his part in it in any writing that has come to light. In a letter to his friend Orville H. Browning, dated June 24, 1847, after recounting some business and personal news, he says: "I am preparing to attend the Chicago River and Harbor Convention." That is all.

Yet it is fair to infer that some after events had their roots in that convention. It was there that Horace Greeley met Edward Bates for the first time. Mr. Greeley conceived a high respect for him as a man of sterling character and great ability. Bates was Greeley's candidate for the Republican nomination for President in 1860. By withdrawing a considerable element from Seward, at the outset the leading candidate for the nomination, he made certain the nomination of Lincoln. It was likewise in the River and Harbor Convention that Mr. Lincoln met Bates for the first time, and when he became President he called Bates into his cabinet as Attorney General.

We know, also, that the convention voiced convictions that in after years became dominant in the growing West. It had an influence that cannot now be measured in electing Zachary Taylor President of the United States in 1848. That the opportunities afforded by the convention were an element in the mental and spiritual development of Abraham Lincoln, cannot be doubted. They had their part in bringing to full flower the character so vividly portrayed by Lowell,--

"The kindly, earnest, brave, foreseeing man,
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,
New birth of our new soil, the first American."