

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED AT ALTON LINCOLN-DOUGLAS

DEBATE.

An Interesting Review of Occurrences on the Day Alton
Will Commemorate in October by Former Post-
master Norton.

The Alton Sentinel-Democrat is favored with one of the most complete and interesting accounts ever made public of the Alton Lincoln-Douglas debate, of fifty years ago, Mr. W.T. Norton, former Postmaster and Editor, producing most interesting and valuable facts in the following communication:

THE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE OF 1858.

In compliance with your request I have written out some incidents of the Lincoln-Douglas debate in this city October 15, 1858, the fiftieth anniversary of which our citizens are about to celebrate. I wish to say, in explanation, that on the 48th anniversary of the debate I published an article in a St. Louis paper on this topic some of the incidents of which are reproduced here. My object is to reflect, as far as possible, the local coloring, as it might be termed, of the occasion, a look backward on the events of the day and the actors therein. The facts related are gleaned mainly from old files of the Alton Daily Courier and from personal reminiscences of individuals who were present at the debate. The discussion in Alton was the closing one of a series of seven, and is rated by historians as the most powerful and important of the several intellectual tournaments between the two great champions of the opposing forces in the "irrepressible conflict". Douglas was, at that time, the leader of the Democratic party in the United States, and was seeking a return to the Senate. Lincoln was the nominee of the Republican party for senator, and the debate was the outcome of a challenge by Lincoln, which Douglas accepted, to discuss the great question of the day, which was the proposed extension of slavery into the territories of Kansas and Nebraska. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 forbade the introduction of slavery into the territory of the United States lying north of latitude 36 deg. 30 min. which was the southern boundary line of Missouri extended westward. The so-called Nebraska bill, which Douglas introduced in the Senate and which was enacted by Congress, repealed the Missouri Compromise and permitted the introduction of slavery into Kansas and Nebraska by a majority vote of the people of those territories on their becoming States. This provision was popularly termed "Squatter Sovereignty". The passage of this bill by Congress in 1854 aroused the anti-slavery sentiment of the north to fever, or, more correctly, the sentiment against the extension of slavery, and resulted in the formation of the Republican party which was composed of an amalgamation of the anti-slavery Whigs, the Abolitionists, and the Free soil or Anti-Nebraska Democrats. In the series of debates Lincoln attacked the provisions of this bill and their resultant effects and Douglas upheld and defended them. The seven debates were scheduled as follows: At Ottawa August 21, 1858; at Freeport, August 28; at Jonesboro, September 15; Charleston, September 18; Galesburg, October 7; Quincy, October 13; Alton, October 15. These debates were attended by great crowds of the adherents of both parties and were occasions of intense political excitement throughout the State. They attracted, in fact, the attention of the entire country, made Lincoln a national figure, as was Douglas, and the nominee of the Republican party for President in 1860.

The outcome of the debate for Douglas was less fortunate he being forced by his opponent to take a position on the slavery question which, while it won him the support of the northern Democracy, alienated the south and made him the candidate of a divided party.

This closing debate in Alton was awaited by our citizens with great interest. The city was decked with flage and banners of the opposing parties and took on a gala day appearance. The great day opened with threatening weather, but the clouds lightened later and the afternoon was clear and balmy, a typical Indian summer day. The crowds began arriving early, delegations coming in wagons and on horseback from surrounding towns and by special trains on the St. Louis, Alton and Chicago railroad, and the Alton and Terre Haute, as these two roads were then known. The steamers White Cloud and Baltimore, also, brought up large delegations from St. Louis. The State capital sent down many notables of both parties escorted by the Springfield cadets, a fine military company, and Merritt's band. The Edwardsville delegation was also accompanied by a band.

Mr. Douglas and Mr. Lincoln both arrived by steamer from Quincy early in the morning and took breakfast at the Alton House, corner of Alby and Front Streets, of which Mr. H.S.Mathews was the proprietor. After breakfast a committee of Republicans called at the Alton House and escorted him to the Franklin House on State Street, of which Mr. S.Pitts, Sr., was proprietor, where he held a reception, while Mr. Douglas received his friends at the Alton House. I find no record of the speakers being met at the boat by any Reception committee though such was probably the case.

The speakers' stand was erected at the northeast corner of the City Hall, then lately completed, at corner of Second and Market Streets. The locality is the same now as then, save for the grading down and filling in of Market street. The published announcement of the arrangements for the debate reads as follows:

LAST GREAT DISCUSSION.

Let all take notice that on Friday next Hon. S.A.Douglas and Hon. A.Lincoln will hold the seventh and closing debate of the campaign at this place. We hope the country will turn out to a man to hear these gentlemen.

The following programme for the discussion has been decided upon by the joint committee appointed by the People's Party and the Democratic club for that purpose:

- (1) The place for said meeting and speaking shall be on east side of City Hall, at 1:30 of that day.
- (2) That C.Stigleman and W.T.Miller be a committee to erect a platform, also to arrange seats to accommodate the ladies.
- (3) Also that Messrs. B.F.Barry and William Post superintend music and salutes.
- (4) That Messrs. H.G.McPike and W.C.Quigley be a committee having charge of the platform and the reception of ladies, and have power to appoint assistants.
- (5) That the reception of Messrs. Douglas and Lincoln be a quiet one and no public display.
- (6) That no banners or mottoes, except national colors, be allowed on the speakers' stand.

Dr. Quigley, of the Democratic club and Mr. McPike of

the People's Club, were also instructed to have the above arrangements published. D.E.Brown was president of the People's Club and Thomas Dimmock, secretary.

Preliminary to the debate meetings were held by all parties the preceding evening to further arouse enthusiasm. The Republican meeting was addressed by Messrs. John M. Palmer, F.S. Rutherford and John Tribble; the Douglas Democratic meeting by Messrs. H.W. Billings, Jos. H. Sloss and Z.B. Job; the Democratic administration meeting by Dr. T.M. Hope and the German Republican meeting by Lt. Gov. Koerner.

"By noon of the eventful day," says the Courier, "the great American people had taken possession of the city. It thronged the streets, hurrahing for Lincoln and Douglas, and finally concentrated about the speakers' stand, at Second and Market Streets, where the stars and stripes floated on the breeze". Many banners bearing mottoes waved over the streets, Mr. Henry Lea displayed one reading: "Illinois, born under the ordinance of 1787 she will maintain its provisions,"

Another, "Lincoln not yet trotted out," and a third:

Free territories and free men,
Free pulpits and free preachers,
Free press and free pen,
Free schools and free teachers."

Mr. E.H. Goulding notified the crowd: "Squat Row For Old Abe and Free Labor". A large flag stretched between the stores of Isaac Scarritt and Bebow H. Barr, bore the motto, "Old Madison for Lincoln" and "Too Late for the Milking". The Democrats displayed a grand royal banner over Third street, reading: "Popular Sovereignty-National Union--S.A. Douglas the People's Choice".

At the appointed hour the crowd gathered about the speakers' stand, which was occupied by many notables, some of whom, besides the debaters, subsequently became national figures. The crowd present was estimated at from 5,000 to 6,000. If there was any chairman of the meeting to introduce the speakers the Courier failed to chronicle the fact, nor have I found, so far, any one who recalls the name of the chairman, if any there was. The Courier simply says: "The hour of two having arrived Judge Douglas opened the debate. Although appearing very well his voice was shattered and his articulation so indistinct that few of the large crowd could understand a complete sentence". Of Lincoln's speech it says: "The hour and a half reply of Lincoln was an effort of which his friends had every reason to be proud. His reply was a complete vindication of himself and the Republican party". On the rejoinder of Douglas its comment was: "Douglas' half hour reply was in better taste and spirit than his opening". The Courier concludes its comments by saying: "This Discussion had been longed for by the Republicans and their expectations were not disappointed for they were more than realized". Doubtless the Courier's comments were tinged by partisanship and, unfortunately, I have no file of the Democratic local paper from which to quote the opinion of the other side as to the issue of the debate.

Among the newspaper men present at the debate were: Hon. George T. Brown, editor of the Courier, and afterwards Sergt. at Arms of the United States Senate; Mr. John Fitch, editor of the Alton National Democrat, later an army officer and author of a volume entitled, "Annals of the Army of the Cumberland". Other journalists present from abroad were: Mr. Paschal, of the St. Louis Republican; Mr. Grissom, of the St. Louis Evening News; Messrs. R.R. Hitt and Horace White of the Chicago Press and Tribune; Mr. Beaman, of the