

JEFFERSON COUNTY POLITICS BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR.¹

BY HON. CHARLES J. FULTON.

THE BUCHANAN-FREMONT-FILLMORE CAMPAIGN.

In the elections of county and State in 1854 the Whigs were victorious. Within twelve months the futility of the Whig party as a National force was generally perceived. Its members no longer possessed a common interest of sufficient importance to bind them together. Upon the pressing problem of the extension of slavery there was radical disagreement. In the other parties also, were divisions and discontent.

The Democratic County Convention which met on June 30, 1855, as a preliminary to participation in its deliberations, required each delegate to "rise in his place and give a pledge that he was a Democrat and had no sympathy with Know Nothings." From each candidate or from his friends satisfactory statements were exacted that he was not a Know Nothing and would not join the order during his term of office should he be elected.

This procedure attracted caustic comment. Hostile partisans were quick to seize the opportunity it afforded them. It was asked why the "thumb-screw regulations" were not applied to that "secret oath-bound society," the "Sag Nichts." And the answer supplied was, "The Sag Nichts are patronized by the present administration and the Know Nothings are not." The Sag Nichts appealed to the prejudices of the foreign born just as the Know Nothings appealed to the prejudices of the native born.

The intensity of feeling actuating the Convention was shown in two resolutions upon which it set the seal of its approval. They were:

Resolved, That they are not all true Americans who are born in America; for among them are Monarchists, Federalists, fanatics,

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secret plotters, unprincipled demagogues, and all those who would sacrifice their country's prosperity and freedom for their own temporary success.

Resolved, That he only is a true American who loves the principles of Democracy, adheres faithfully to the Constitution of the United States, labors to extend the principles of free government throughout the world, and to the oppressed everywhere, and cordially despises "every species of tyranny over the mind of man."

These were the conditions political when, on July 14th, "a People's Republican Convention," pursuant to a call signed by more than a hundred citizens, but recently Whigs, Democrats and Free Soilers, proposing only "an upright administration" of county offices and requiring of candidates only "that they be honest and capable," gathered at the courthouse. One hundred and seventy-six voters took part in the proceedings. They chose for president, Christian W. Slagle, and for secretary, Ebenezer S. Gage. Their platform was prepared by a committee consisting of Caleb Baldwin, Mathew Clark, J. S. Mount, John W. DuBois and George Hanawalt. It was clear, concise and direct. These were its planks:

I. We declare our implicit faith in a Republican form of government.

II. We declare that, in the use of the elective franchise under such form of government, the citizen is responsible to his country for the use he makes of it, and not to any political party.

III. We declare that the exercise of a free and enlightened judgment is an indispensable requisite to the proper exercise of the elective franchise; that in the exercise of such judgment it is the absolute right of the citizen to form his own political opinion, and that it is anti-republican for any party, man or men, to control the citizen in the exercise of this right.

IV. We declare that we refuse to endorse any of the political parties of the country; but, while we thus withhold our endorsement, we recognize in the masses of all parties a common brotherhood laboring for the common good of the country; and we utterly repudiate the right of any party to brand as Monarchists, fanatics, traitors, or villains, any portion of the great brotherhood.

V. We declare that in the selection of public officers the voice of the people should be supreme.

VI. We declare our unqualified endorsement of the Republican qualifications for office—honesty and capability.

VII. We declare on the subject of slavery this proposition: Shall freedom be confined to the free States, or slavery to the slave States? as the sense of this convention we pronounce the latter.

VIII. We declare we will use every honorable means, as a free and independent people, to secure the election of the ticket we have this day nominated.

The ferment of the times was touched upon in resolutions offered by Richard Gaines. As dangerous propositions, they were laid on the table. They were:

1. That the aggressions of slavery, and especially the Nebraska outrage and the assault upon the elective franchise of Kansas, have aroused the freemen of the Republic, and that they will maintain their rights and resist the addition of slave territory.
2. That they will maintain the nationality of freedom.
3. That the friends of freedom should make principles, not birth-place, the test of admission to citizenship.
4. That we will repel every ecclesiastical interference in political affairs, by potentate, pontiff or priest, as destructive of the right to worship God according to the dictates of conscience and of liberty.

A suggestion that there be at Fairfield at the time of the State Fair in October a conference of Republicans, though obtaining favorable comment in several papers, was not carried out. It was not till February 22, 1856, that a convention of "free citizens," in the belief that a large majority of the people of Iowa were "opposed to the political principles of the present administration, and to the introduction of slavery into territory now free, and also that made free by the Compromise of 1820;" and that the Democratic Party was "striving to make slavery a great national institution contrary to the principles laid down in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as taught by the Fathers of the Republic," assembled at Iowa City for the purpose of organizing a Republican party. A. R. Fulton and W. M. Clark attended from Jefferson county. This convention, in accomplishing the end for which it was called together, announced "That the mission of the Republican Party is to maintain the Liberties of the People, the Sovereignty of the States and the Perpetuity of the Union," and "That under the Constitution, and by right, Freedom alone is National."

The Republican movement was bitterly assailed in the Democratic papers. To their strictures the response was, "The struggle has finally come between the principles of slavery and freedom, and the people will be quick to perceive, in the language of Jefferson, 'that the Almighty has no attribute which will permit Him to take sides with the slaveholder.'"

On March 15th, there met at the courthouse a Republican County Convention open to all who desired "to act in good faith" with the party. Benjamin Robinson was made chairman, and C. O. Stanton, secretary. The platform adopted at Iowa City was ratified and affirmed with this addition:

That we ask no conformity of opinion, and no unity of belief on minor matters—State or National; that in regard to office, we hold merit, not birth-place, to be the test—deeming the rule of Thomas Jefferson—is he honest?—is he capable?—the only true rule; that we are opposed to the extension of the time required for naturalization, believing as we do that we should welcome the exiles and emigrants from the old world to homes of enterprise and of freedom in the new.

An election of district and county officers on April 7th favored the Democrats. This outcome, instead of bringing discouragement and lack of interest, stimulated the Republicans to greater exertions. Though surprised at their defeat, "Pick the flint and try it again," was their firm resolve.

The stirring and tragic events of the next few weeks—the violence and bloodshed in Kansas, the assault of Brooks upon Sumner in the Senate chamber—accentuated and drew with definiteness the dividing line between the Democratic and Republican parties.

The candidates for the Presidency were Fillmore, nominated on February 22d, at Philadelphia, by the Americans, Buchanan, nominated on June 6th, at Cincinnati, by the Democrats, and Fremont, nominated on June 18th, at Philadelphia, by the Republicans. For Fremont, because he "loved freedom and hated slavery"; because he would "do justice to the North and no injustice to the South"; because he had "never flinched from the performance of any duty"; because he had "rendered signal service to his country" and had

“never asked for political rewards on that account”, and because he knew the West and sympathized with its needs, there was a real and genuine enthusiasm.

On June 17th, a Democratic County Convention endorsed the administration of Franklin Pierce, the Cincinnati Convention, and named a county ticket. On the 28th, a Republican County Convention endorsed the National and State platforms of the party, pronounced in favor of a convention to revise the Constitution of the State of Iowa, hailed “with patriotic joy” the nomination of John C. Fremont and William L. Dayton, and likewise named a county ticket.

Governor Grimes having called an extra session of the legislature, and the regularly elected representatives, James Wamsley and Edmund Mechem, having removed from the county, at a special election on June 30th, William Bickford and Christian E. Noble, the Republican nominees, were chosen to fill the vacancies.

Fremont Clubs and Buchanan Clubs were organized. Throughout the summer, slavery, disunion and the admission of Kansas into the Union as a Free State, were discussed with vigor.

In the election of state and county officers on August 4th the Republicans won. For a Constitutional Convention there was a majority of eighty-eight. “The Administration forces fought with desperation,” ran a fervid announcement of the victory, “but Freedom’s army swept the field, leaving not a vestige of hunkerism to mark the spot where waved the black banner of slavery extensionists.”

About the middle of September, an emigrant train passed through Fairfield on its way to Kansas. The Buchanan Club, its “indignation” aroused, on the 18th, formally asserted, after a lengthy preamble, “That James W. Grimes, Governor of Iowa, by thus countenancing the migration of *armed* men through the State, whose apparent purpose is the *invasion* of a sister province, is, in the opinion of the members of this club, acting in violation of his duties as a Governor.” The belief was professed that “it is the duty of *all* good citizens to remonstrate and request him to interpose his authority to

prevent the passage of those armed bodies of men through our State or resign his office." Democratic papers were "requested to publish" these expressions, and Democratic clubs "to take action thereon."

A Democratic mass meeting at Fairfield on October 4th nominated William G. Coop as a candidate for delegate to the Constitutional Convention, but neither passed nor considered any recommendations for specific changes in the Constitution. On the 18th, the Republicans in turn nominated by acclamation James F. Wilson as a candidate for delegate to the Constitutional Convention. In respect to the revision of the Constitution, they voiced these opinions:

1. *Resolved*, That Section 1 of the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of Iowa, declaring that "all men are by nature free and independent, and have certain inalienable rights among which are those of enjoying and defending life and liberty, acquiring, possessing and protecting property, and pursuing and obtaining safety and happiness;" as also Section 23 of said Bill of Rights, declaring that "slavery nor involuntary servitude unless for the punishment of crimes shall never be tolerated in this State," shall be preserved inviolate.

2. *Resolved*, That the evils to which the people of this State are subject on account of the mixed, uncertain and in many instances unsound currency imposed upon them by other States, the Territory of Nebraska, and irresponsible individual bankers, ought to be remedied, and that the best and most practicable remedy is to reserve to the people in the revised Constitution the right to establish within this State a sound banking system of their own.

3. *Resolved*, That the election of the Supreme Judges of the State should be taken from the Legislature and referred to the people.

4. *Resolved*, That the clause regulating the time for holding the general election should be changed, so as to fix a different time from the 1st Monday of August, or leave said time as a subject for legislation.

5. *Resolved*, That while we are opposed to paying exorbitant salaries to state and county officers, we are in favor of establishing such a standard as will afford to the officer a fair remuneration for his services and at the same time place the offices within the reach of all citizens, however humble their pecuniary circumstances.

6. *Resolved*, That we are opposed to the accumulation of an onerous State debt, and in favor of so restricting the Legislature

in this respect that all acts creating any debt shall provide a fund for its payment, and that all acts providing for extraordinary expenditures, except in case of an invasion or insurrection, and calculated to establish an onerous indebtedness on the part of the State shall be referred to the people for their action and shall not take effect unless approved by the vote of the people.

In a letter accepting the nomination, James F. Wilson gave at length his views upon these declarations. Upon them all he stood four square. The first he considered essential to "the safety of the doctrines of Freedom and Human Rights." As to the third, he held that "all officers should be elected by the people." Of the last, he maintained "that the true policy is to refer propositions for creating State indebtedness to the people for their action, with a view to affording those who have to bear the burden an opportunity to say whether or no they will accept it." In this connection, it is a pertinent comment that upon the organization of the Constitutional Convention James F. Wilson himself was named as Chairman of the Committee on State Debts, that to him fell the lot of drafting the restriction, and that his report, save for raising the limitation from one hundred thousand dollars to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, was virtually adopted as presented.

In the last days of the campaign, the fight turned upon the delegate to the Constitutional Convention. Should the Constitution embody the principle of Freedom? The decision was rendered on November 4th in 1,207 votes for Wilson and 1,122 votes for Coop. At the same time there were cast by Republicans 1,188 votes for Fremont; by Democrats 1,023 votes for Buchanan; and by Americans and Whigs combined 206 votes for Fillmore. The strength of the sentiment against the extension of slavery was unmistakable.

THE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS-BRECKINRIDGE-BELL CAMPAIGN.

For three years slavery was a subject of constant and earnest public discussion. In them the consciences of men were searched out and prepared for the coming struggle.

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