

# Untamed Greenbacker

## James Baird Weaver

by Robert B. Mitchell

**O**n the afternoon of April 4, 1879, as the House of Representatives neared the conclusion of a rancorous debate, one of Iowa's newest members of Congress stood to address his colleagues. Remarks by a first-term member of Congress usually attracted little notice, but in the highly charged atmosphere that permeated Capitol Hill, James Baird Weaver could expect to command attention.

The aftermath of the 1876 election—in which President Rutherford B. Hayes had lost the popular vote but was elected with disputed electoral votes from southern states with Reconstruction governments—embittered Democrats and fueled white-hot partisanship with strong sectional overtones. Now Democrats and Republicans were deadlocked over legislation to fund the U.S. Army, forcing Hayes to call a special session of the new 46th Congress. As Weaver, a 45-year-old Civil War veteran from the southern Iowa town of Bloomfield, prepared to speak, passions remained intense.

Many wondered how Weaver would align himself on the issues paralyzing Washington. The new congressman, a former Republican, belonged to a third party known variously as the "Greenbacks" or "Greenbackers." In the House, where Democrats held a tenuous 18-vote majority, the votes of this new party could help determine the balance of power. From the city's streetcars to the White House, conjecture about the strength and in-

tentions of the Greenbacks had flourished for weeks, and a front-page item in the city's new newspaper, the *Washington Post*, fanned the curiosity. As the crucial vote on the army bill neared, the paper reported that Weaver planned to address the House but noted a surprising twist. Weaver "will not say much" on the army funding, the *Post* stated, but instead "proposes to take advantage of the opportunity to 'outline the policy of the Greenback Party.'"

As predicted, Weaver spent little time addressing the controversy that consumed the House. Instead, speaking in what one account described as an "easy and earnest" style, he argued that the economy, caught in a prolonged depression and afflicted by devastating deflation, was now the most important problem facing the country. Republicans and Democrats preferred "to fight over sectional issues like maddened gladiators bent on mortal combat," Weaver charged, rather than vote on "measures of relief for the people." It was time, he declared, for Congress to stop bickering about the issues of the past.

"The people of this country have witnessed for many years with painful impatience the continuation of this sectional strife. It has become distasteful to them in every part of the Union where they have the control of their right reason," Weaver warned. Given the shortsighted obsession of Democrats and Republicans with

J. B. WEAVER

*Copy*

D. H. PAYNE

LAW OFFICE OF

WEAVER & PAYNE

Stoomfield, Iowa Aug 29<sup>th</sup> 1877

Hon Geo H Gear  
Burlington Iowa

My dear Sir:

Differing, as I do, widely with the Republican party upon questions of finance, I find it impossible for me to go before the People and advocate a continuance of that Policy.

Neither do I feel that it would be right for me to remain silent and withhold my protest against what I conceive to be a significant wrong.

I wish therefore to be released from my pledge of personal support, assuring you, sincerely, my action is not dictated by considerations personal to yourself.

I shall act with the Independents with high respect  
I am very respectfully  
J. B. Weaver

"I shall act with the Independents," James Baird Weaver asserts in an 1877 letter (above) to party rival John H. Gear. Weaver broke from the Republican Party over "questions of finance,... finding it impossible for me to go before the People and advocate a continuance of that policy [or] to remain silent and withhold my protest." In the background: a broadside announces "the people's grand round-up," a political rally for Weaver in Oskaloosa in 1888. The broadside invited "every laboringman and woman that ... wants to prevent corruption and corporation tools from defrauding the people out of their votes and their rights."

General J. B.

Weaver!

The People's

GRAND ROUND UP



Carver  
Wm. H. ...  
Washington, D.C.

Oskaloosa  
has a true love  
from defrauding  
HOUSE at 8  
joins us in the  
upon fraud.

sectional issues, he said, a new party was needed to work for prosperity: "The Lord is raising up that party now. The workmen are all at work in the quarries, and every block in the temple shall be peace."

Weaver's speech foreshadowed the course of his eventful first two years in Washington, during which he emerged as the national spokesman for the Greenback Party. Four years earlier, after a string of stunning defeats in Iowa, Weaver's once-promising political career had appeared finished. With his election to Congress in 1878, his fortunes revived. Eloquent, energetic, and driven by a deep religious faith, Weaver thrived in his national political debut, vaulting from failure in Iowa to the vanguard of agrarian radicalism as it developed into a potent force in American politics.

**W**eaver's experiences growing up in southern Iowa laid the groundwork for his emergence as a third-party leader. Like that of many Iowans of his generation, his story began in Ohio, where he was born in 1833. Two years later, the family moved to Michigan, and then, when James was nine, settled on a farm in Davis County, Iowa. James attended a log schoolhouse, where Friday afternoon spelling bees "stimulated youthful ambition to blood heat," he later recounted, and where he discovered a lifelong love for public contests of wit and wordplay—a passion later demonstrated in the U.S. Congress.

Early on, James was exposed to frontier politics and partisanship. His father, Abram, served as one of the county's first commissioners and maintained his political involvement after the family moved from the farm to Bloomfield, the county seat. Although Abram Weaver was a Democrat, his son-in-law was a Whig. Kentucky-born Hosea B. Horn edited a Whig newspaper in Indiana supporting Henry Clay before moving to Davis County, where he married Margaret Weaver and quickly established himself as a leading lawyer and businessman. After the discovery of gold in California, Horn headed west and published an overland guide with detailed notes about water, terrain, and trail conditions. Upon returning to Iowa he ran for state treasurer on the Whig ticket and later edited the pro-Republican *Davis County Index*. James followed the trail blazed by his brother-in-law Horn, both in his choice of professions as well as in a more literal sense. With three companions, 19-year-old Weaver went to California in March 1853 in search of gold, returning to southern Iowa about a year later.

Religion, like politics, occupied an important place in the Weaver family. Late in life, Weaver recalled the spirited worship services conducted by frontier circuit riders who "reminded us of God and duty" and presided over worship services where "Amen and Hallelujah resounded as a matter of course." This fervent faith made a lasting impact, and Weaver remained devoutly religious throughout his life. As an adult, he was an active Methodist layman whose piety became a political trademark. Weaver "does not smoke; neither does he drink nor swear," the *New York World* wrote in 1892. "Once in a while he sings. He has a good baritone voice, and when he was superintendent of the Sunday school in Bloomfield he was a noted singer."

Although Weaver was exposed to politics and developed his faith growing up in Davis County, he forged the link between the two while studying law at the Cincinnati Law School in the mid-1850s under Professor Bellamy Storer. A former Whig congressman who in his youth had organized a squad of traveling evangelists known as "flying artillery," Storer expounded on the duty of lawyers to look out for the common good of all social classes and to base moral and political choices on biblical teaching. The "healthy vigor of no government can be preserved, where the same rule that teaches man to fear his Maker is not equally the controlling motive of the law giver," Storer asserted. Weaver embraced Storer's teachings and regarded him as such a significant influence that he proposed naming his first son after him. Echoes of Storer's views on religion and politics resonated almost 40 years later in Weaver's Populist manifesto, *A Call to Action* (1892). Weaver described the agrarian radical movement to which he devoted his political career as "the religion of the Master in motion among men," mobilized to oppose "extortionists, usurers and oppressors" who reject the Golden Rule and embrace "the law of Cain."

Returning to Iowa with a law degree and a commitment to oppose slavery, Weaver joined Davis County's small band of antislavery activists and settled into the life of a rising young professional in Bloomfield. He opened a law practice in 1856 and wooed Clarissa Vinson, a Keosauqua schoolteacher. Intellectually inclined, politically aware, and possessed of a tough-minded independence, Clara made an ideal partner for the principled and politically ambitious Weaver. "The man has not yet been made that I would be afraid of," she advised him while they were courting. Like James, she loved intellectual inquiry and was "determined to learn all I can, even if I cannot show it off to advantage." Perhaps most importantly, she shared his deep religious beliefs. "I have been trying to live the life of a



Weaver entered the Civil War as a first lieutenant in Company G of the 2nd Iowa Infantry. A regimental history describes him as “rather brilliant,” a man of “dignity and self-assurance.” Right: Today a private residence, James and Clara Weaver’s brick home in Bloomfield is a National Historic Landmark.

Christian too long to give it up now,” she reassured him. The couple wed in 1858, beginning a potent personal and political partnership that lasted for the rest of their lives. Clara stood “in perfect sympathy” with her husband throughout his political career, Weaver biographer Fred Emory Haynes has written, and was active in her own right in the temperance and woman suffrage movements in Iowa.

In June 1859, the Weavers became the parents of a baby girl, Maud, the first of eight children born to the couple over the next 18 years. Almost two years later, the outbreak of the Civil War pulled Weaver away from home. He enlisted in an infantry company assigned to the 2nd Iowa Infantry and fought at two of the war’s most important battles, Fort Donelson and Shiloh. He rose through the ranks and found himself in command of the 2nd Iowa during the fall of 1862 at the battle of Corinth in northern Mississippi. Even in war, Weaver’s faith animated his politics; his battle report lionized the Union dead for giving their lives in “the cause of Christianity and constitutional liberty.”

As a war hero, staunch Republican, and active member of the Methodist Church (Iowa’s largest denomination and ally of the Republican Party), Weaver’s political prospects appeared bright. He assumed temporary editorship of the *Weekly Union Guard* in Bloomfield—

an ideal perch for a politically ambitious young man—and in 1866 received the honorary title of brigadier general in recognition of his war record. He was elected district attorney for Davis, Appanoose, Wapello, Monroe, Van Buren, and Wayne counties in 1866, and the following year President Andrew Johnson named him assessor for internal revenue in southeastern Iowa. As Weaver’s political horizons expanded, so did his family. Clara and James added five to their brood between 1866 and 1877 and erected a grand brick home that testified to their growing prestige.

Not long after moving into the new home, however, Weaver encountered a series of demoralizing setbacks that he attributed to his support for prohibition. The campaign to outlaw the sale and consumption of alcohol intensified in Iowa in the years following the Civil War. Party leaders grew increasingly uncomfortable over the divisive issue and tried to distance themselves from it. As historian Joseph F. Wall has written, prohibition “cut across conservative and liberal lines, dividing former political allies and creating new coalitions in ways that were most disturbing to the party professionals.” In 1874, Weaver was defeated by one vote at the Republican congressional district nominating convention in Ottumwa after appearing at a temperance rally in the same city. Years later he recalled that after

the votes were tallied, convention delegates exulted "that we have defeated the d—d prohibitionist."

In 1875, he campaigned for the Republican gubernatorial nomination and appeared to be the front-runner, but last-minute maneuvering on the floor of the state convention gave the nomination to former governor Samuel J. Kirkwood. Historian Leland Sage has attributed Weaver's defeat to factional infighting between supporters of U.S. Senator William Boyd Allison of Dubuque and former senator James Harlan of Mount Pleasant, a Weaver ally. But Weaver characterized Kirkwood's nomination as a "stampede to defeat me because of my very well known temperance views." Weaver returned to Davis County and won the Republican nomination for the county's state senate seat but was again defeated, he recounted, after Kirkwood "turned his guns against prohibition" during a campaign appearance in Bloomfield.

As the decade continued, Weaver gravitated to the Greenback cause, taking note of "the encroachments of confederated monopoly and . . . how completely this sinister influence had captured the leadership and machinery of the two great parties." By 1877, his disenchantment with the Republicans was complete. He joined the Greenback Party and in 1878 ran for Congress. Working skillfully to win Democratic support in the south-central 6th District, he campaigned as the "fusion" candidate of Greenbacks and Democrats and defeated incumbent Republican E. S. Sampson by more than 2,000 votes. Support for the Greenback Party extended beyond Weaver's district into central Iowa, where voters also elected Greenback Edward H. Gillette of Des Moines.

**W**eaver turned to the Greenback Party at a time when economic questions preoccupied many in Iowa and elsewhere. The nation was still recovering from economic depression brought on by the Panic of 1873. In 1877, rioting erupted in Chicago, St. Louis, and several eastern cities as striking railroad workers protested wage cuts. President Hayes called out federal troops to restore order in Baltimore and Martinsburg, West Virginia. Economic dislocation caused by the depression was not confined to the big cities. Farmers were increasingly hard pressed to pay mortgages and other debts as commodity prices fell. Historian Gretchen Ritter observes that between 1865 and 1879, prices fell by half throughout the economy, while output increased. In a congressional speech, Gillette vividly described how the

crushing impact of debt and deflation in central Iowa had filled "the highways . . . with emigrant wagons" carrying farmers "who are starved out from the richest garden land in the world" to seek new homes farther west. "This," Gillette concluded sardonically, "is at present the reward of industry in the United States."

Several factors contributed to the decline in commodity prices. The number of acres devoted to farming increased dramatically in the years after the Civil War, and production of staples such as corn and wheat skyrocketed as improvements in farm equipment increased output. Monetary policies also contributed to the downward pressure on prices. In 1875, Congress passed the Resumption Act, to reduce paper "greenback" currency in circulation and to return to the gold standard. "Distracted Iowans," however, "joined others in calling for an inflationary program based on increasing the amount of greenbacks in circulation," historian Thomas Burnell Colbert writes. Still others favored fighting deflation by the reintroduction of silver, removed from circulation by Congress in 1873. Those who favored more liberal use of greenbacks and silver were known as advocates of "soft money," while defenders of the gold standard were said to favor "hard money."

The Greenbacks also criticized the banking system instituted during the Civil War in which large national banks—many located in the East—bought interest-bearing federal bonds and issued currency notes. Capital and reserve requirements, as well as regional differences in the banking system, tended to concentrate cash in northeastern banks and restrict the flow of funds into rural areas.

Greenbacks charged that the banking system, in tandem with the management of the nation's money supply, operated for the benefit of eastern and foreign financiers and against the interests of farmers and laborers. Gillette characterized the system as "an injustice to the people and favoritism to a class . . . without a rival." Financial conservatives, on the other hand, argued that banks properly played a vital role in administering the nation's currency.

Across the country, voters distressed by the economy turned to the Greenback Party in the 1878 congressional elections. The party's candidates received more than one million votes nationwide—a tenfold increase in two years. In addition to Weaver and Gillette, the Greenback camp included former Republicans, such as Rep. William D. Kelley of Pennsylvania; a Methodist minister, Rep. Gilbert De La Matyr of Indiana; southerners, such as Rep. William M. Lowe of Alabama; and disaffected Democrats, such as Adlai Stevenson of Illinois, who later returned to the Democratic Party and served as Grover Cleveland's vice president.

LEGAL TENDER. LOW INTEREST.

**3.65**  
**BONDS.**




LET US **United States** IN THE

INDEPENDENT PARTY  
**GREENBACK CLUB**

National Legal Tender Money, interchangeable with government bond, the only means of restoring National Prosperity, securing the respect for the rights of labor and money capital, and preventing Financial Ruin.

Bank paper must be suppressed, and the circulation restored to the nation, to whom it belongs.—THOMAS JEFFERSON.

"It is labor and not coin that sustains the nation's credit."  
GREENBACKS, PROSPERITY AND PEACE.

AWAY WITH MONOPOLIES.

### DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES.

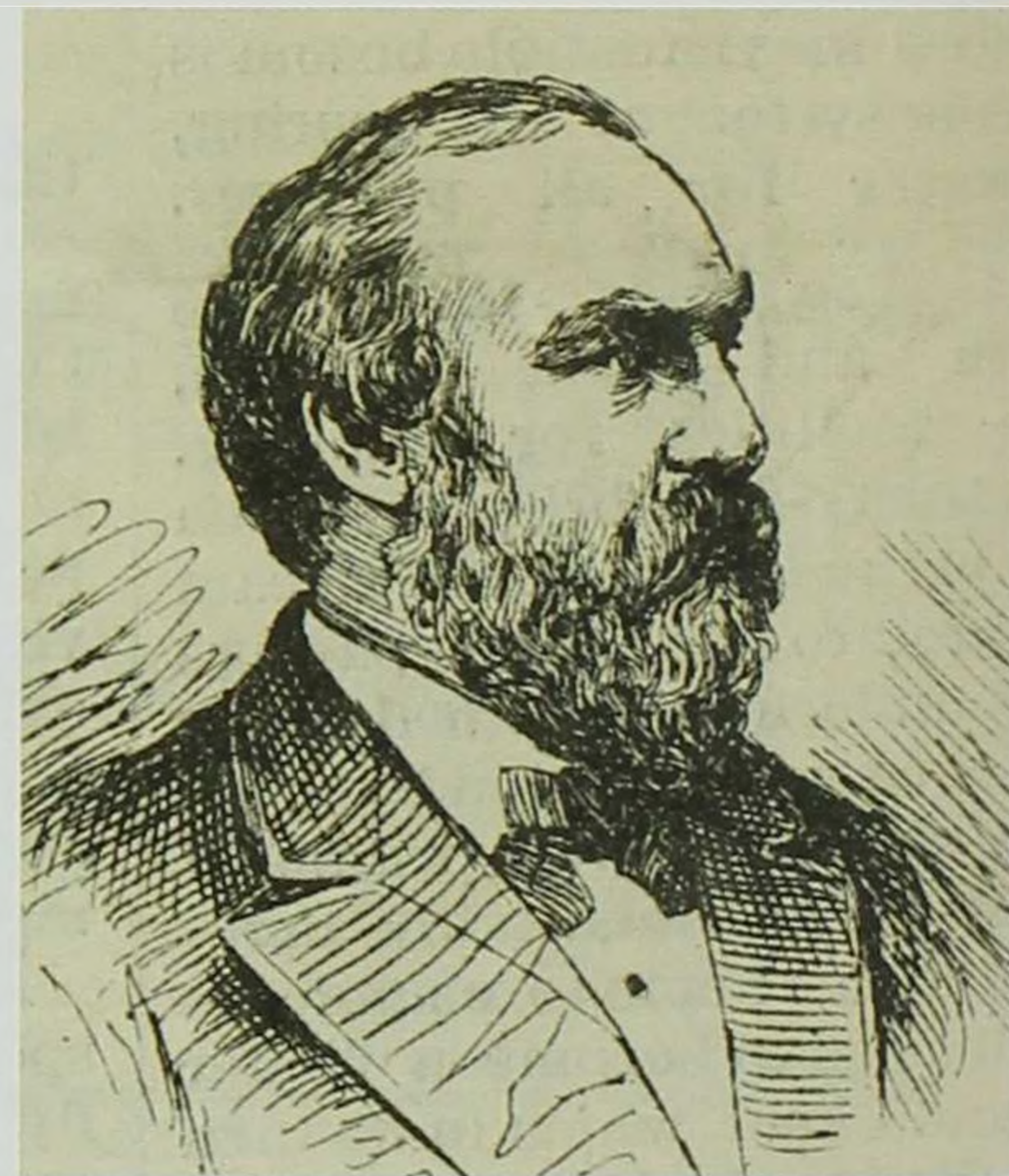
Our Government is founded solely upon the consent of the people, and its powers are subject to their control. The evils we now live under have resulted from the acts of unfaithful representatives, who have set the interests of the party above that of the people. These evils are chiefly displayed in our monetary system and the monopolies which it has engendered; this system being monarchical in its principles and subversive of Republican Government. And as experience demonstrates that we can have no hope of reform from existing political parties, it becomes our imperative duty to organize a new party, to the end that we may resist the encroachments of the money power upon the rights of the people, stay the tide of corruption and extravagance which overflows the land, and place the control of the resources and finances of the country in the hands of the people. We therefore establish the Independent Party, and declare its principles to be as follows:

1. It is the duty of the Government to establish a monetary system based upon the faith and resources of the nation, in harmony with the genius of this Government, and adapted to the demands of legitimate business. To this end the circulating notes of all National and State banks, as well as all local currency, should be withdrawn from circulation, and a paper money issued by the Government directly to the people without the intervention of any system of banking corporations, which money shall be a legal tender in payment of all debts, public and private, duties on imports included (except that portion of the interest and principal of the present public debt that is, by the express terms of the law creating it, made payable in metallic money, shall be so paid). This money to be interchangeable, at the option of the holders, with registered Government bonds, bearing a rate of interest not exceeding 3.65 per cent, per annum.
2. This system of finance will, by stimulating our industries and commerce, soon make the United States the depository of the precious metals of the world.
3. The adoption of this system, by furnishing sufficient money at low interest, will solve the question of cheap transportation, because it will enable the railroads and carrying trades to relieve themselves of their loads of debt, lower their rates, and enable the people to construct additional lines whenever internal commerce may require.
4. It is the duty of the Government, in all its legislation, to keep in view the full development of the agricultural and mineral resources of our country and its manufacturing interests.
5. That the great interests of productive industry claim their just recognition at the hands of the Government, and through the monetary system here proposed all these interests can be fully secured.
6. That as the public domain is the rightful heritage of the people, it should not be distributed to speculators or corporations but reserved for actual settlers.
7. That it is the duty of the Government to equalize the bounties of soldiers, and to bring to a speedy settlement all other just claims arising out of the late war.
8. All rights, privileges and immunities recognized by the Government should be based on the fact of citizenship, equal rights before the law being secured by the constitution.
9. That we demand and insist upon severe retrenchment and economy in all branches of the public service.
10. The rivers and harbors being under the jurisdiction of the Government, should be by it improved when necessary to the commerce of the people.
11. Through the monetary system herein proposed, there will be established between the citizens of this country, East, West, North and South, a firm and lasting bond of union, by giving a common interest in a common Government, and bringing peace and prosperity to each and all of its inhabitants.
12. As all special privileges, immunities and powers conferred on corporations of any kind or nature are granted at the expense of the people, these privileges and powers must be held subordinate to the rights of the people, and subject to the supervision and control of the power creating them.

We, the undersigned, indorse and subscribe to the above Preamble and Declaration of Principles; and for the purpose of inculcating a more thorough knowledge of and adherence to these principles and having the same enacted into laws, and adopted as the controlling policy in our National and State Governments, we hereby absolve ourselves from all former party allegiance and organize ourselves into *Independent Party Greenback Club, No. 1, of Washington, County, State of Iowa*, subject to such rules and by-laws as may be adopted by said Club.

To establish a local Greenback Club, members signed this Declaration of Principles. The preamble reads in part: "The evils we now live under . . . are chiefly displayed in our monetary system and the monopolies which it has engendered. . . [With] no hope of reform from existing political parties, it becomes our imperative duty to organize a new party."

BOTH IMAGES: SHSI (IOWA CITY)



In the 46th Congress, Republican James Garfield (far right) lost to Democrat Samuel Randall for Speaker of the House. The Democrats held a slim majority.

Two political professionals hardened by the battles of Reconstruction and Hayes's controversial election led the House of Representatives. The Speaker of the House, Democrat Samuel J. Randall of Pennsylvania, had come to Congress from the machine politics of Philadelphia and earned, Stevenson recalled, a "national reputation" as a skillful partisan. "He was an excellent presiding officer, prompt, often aggressive," and "rarely vanquished." James A. Garfield, the Republican leader from Ohio, was a principled financial conservative who opposed the Greenback program. He had served as an officer in the Union Army and fought at Shiloh. "Gifted with rare powers of oratory, with an apparently inexhaustible reservoir of information at his command, he knew no superior in debate," Stevenson wrote. Garfield also possessed, as historian Ray Ginger has noted, a capacity for shrewd political calculation.

With Democrats and Republicans separated by a handful of votes in the House, Weaver and the Greenbacks seemed well positioned to extract concessions and win influence. But Republican and Democratic leaders shunned the insurgents. Support from the Greenbacks and a few disenchanted Democrats could have elected Garfield Speaker of the House, but the Ohioan wanted nothing to do with the new party. "The political pot in the city is boiling fiercely over organization of the House," Garfield confided in his diary in March 1879. Even so, he instructed his Republican lieutenants "to say to everybody for me that we would make no trade with either Greenbackers or Democrats on the subject of the Speakership."

Although the House retained Randall as Speaker,

Garfield noted with relief that "the boast of any strength in the New Organization calling itself the Greenback Party amounted to but little." Randall shared Garfield's discomfort with the Greenback caucus. When the two leaders met to discuss committee composition, Randall expressed his gratitude "for keeping our people aloof from the Greenbackers," Garfield wrote, "and is disposed to do whatever I suggest in regard to the Republican cast of the committees."

Kept at arm's length by the Democratic and Republican leadership, the Greenbacks could do little but promote their agenda through floor debate and oratory. Such a situation was made to order for Weaver, and he seized it with relish, beginning with his debut speech in April 1879. Over the next three months, Weaver intervened in House debates whenever there was a chance to argue for the Greenback position.

When the House debated a proposal by Ohio Democrat A. J. Warner to authorize unlimited coinage of silver, Weaver moved quickly to become one of the bill's most prominent advocates. Adopting the tone of a displeased schoolteacher, Weaver lamented the "levity, sarcasm, and abuse" showered on supporters of the Warner bill. In a lengthy floor speech, he warned that dependence on gold "will lead us into inevitable decline and pauperism" and he blamed the Resumption Act for the nation's economic difficulties. He also took aim at the relationship between the banks and the U.S. Treasury, which produced "permanent national banks and permanent national debt, the banks resting upon the debt."

After Weaver concluded, skeptical conservatives peppered him with pointed questions. Republican John

Mitchell of Pennsylvania asked Weaver if he had voted for President Grant, who supported the monetary policies Weaver now denounced. Weaver allowed that he had but explained that he had done so prior to his conversion to Greenback principles: "I was in the same condition with Saul of Tarsus when on his way to Damascus." William Fletcher Sapp of Iowa demanded that Weaver concede that the banks were in no way permanent institutions, that their charters expired after 20 years. Weaver would have none of it. "As the law now stands [the banks] are about as perpetual as the human family," Weaver answered back. "The Almighty says that the days of a man's years shall be three score and ten. Was it the intention that at the death of my friend [Congressman Sapp] the human family shall cease?" The *Congressional Record* noted that Weaver's riposte provoked "great laughter" in the House. Weaver and like-minded lawmakers effectively used debate on the Warner bill to put forth their views on the currency question to a national audience.

During these first months in Congress, Weaver attracted the attention of newspapers and politicians nationwide. His debut speech in April had established him as the spokesman for the Greenback bloc. "The Rev. De La Matyr, who it was supposed would be the leading orator of the Greenback Party, will have to surrender his claims to Weaver, of Iowa, 'the silver-tongued soft-money man of the Northwest,' as his friends are fond of calling him," the *Iowa State Register* reported. He made a particularly strong impression in New York, where reaction in the city's political and journalistic establishment ranged from approval to predictable condemnation. The city's reform politicians invited him to speak at the prestigious Cooper Institute. The *New York Times*, however, was not impressed, complaining that "the spirit" of Weaver's remarks about the Warner silver bill was "practically as bitter and as uncompromising as that shown by the Socialists of Germany, or the Nihilists of Russia in their respective countries."

**W**eaver's skirmishes in the first session foreshadowed the dramatic battle that would propel him to unquestioned leadership of the Greenback movement. When lawmakers returned to Washington in early 1880 for the second session of the 46th Congress, Weaver pursued a new strategy—one that would turn the antagonism of congressional leaders to the Greenbacks' advantage and catapult the new party's agenda to the forefront of national politics. He drafted a two-part reso-

lution reflecting Greenback principles. The first called for an end to the banks' role in monetary policy by placing the federal government in charge of issuing currency and controlling its volume. The second declared that the federal government should repay the federal debt as rapidly as possible, using all currency, including silver and "such other coinage" as may be required.

Beginning in January, Weaver began to seek recognition for his resolution on Mondays, when members could ask for recognition from the Speaker to bring bills directly to the floor. This put Samuel Randall on the spot. Either he could recognize Weaver and allow a debate that would call attention to the deep divisions within the Democratic Party on the incendiary monetary question, or he could block consideration of the measure by refusing to recognize Weaver.

Stumbling into Weaver's trap, Randall chose the latter course, and the standoff became a regular feature of congressional business during the winter and early spring of 1880. On February 10, the *Washington Post* alluded to the emerging confrontation when it reported that "Weaver, the untamed Greenbacker from Iowa, made another effort to get the floor" only to be blocked by Randall, "which provoked some little discussion."

Randall confided to Weaver that he did not want Democrats put on record regarding "mere abstractions" in a presidential election year. But the Speaker had not counted on the Iowan's stubbornness. "After a few weeks of fruitless effort," Weaver recalled, "the [resolution] got into the papers and began to attract very wide attention. Crowds began to throng the galleries on Mondays" to observe the drama. Even the *New York Times*, usually hostile to Weaver, objected to the tactics used against him. Weaver, the paper editorialized in early March, can "enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that the cowardice and evasion" of Democratic and Republican leaders will help Greenbacks more "than a frank and fair disposal of his resolution by a vote of the House." As the weekly drama continued, pressure on Randall increased. The Speaker was flooded with mail, Weaver recounted, half of it praising Randall for his firmness, and half "denouncing him as a tyrant worthy of death."

Randall was not the only figure in the drama who came under attack. The *Washington Post* declared that "Weaver, of Iowa, is rapidly becoming a grand Congressional nuisance." Sniping from newspapers was nothing new for Weaver, but he was startled by the storm his tenacity provoked elsewhere. In early March, *Harper's Weekly* published a full-page cartoon by caricaturist Thomas Nast, whose talent for lampooning politicians had helped end the corrupt career of New York's Boss Tweed in the previous decade. Nast now ridiculed



Weaver as a toga-wearing donkey braying on the House floor, with "inflation resolutions" tucked under his arm. The Speaker's back is turned, and legislators hide under their desks or cover their ears. "The imaginative genius of Nast was called upon to swell the volume of misrepresentation and ridicule," Weaver wrote later. He called Nast's cartoon a "full page scurrillous travesty."

Nevertheless, Weaver characteristically found a way to turn the sketch to his advantage by referring to a well-known Old Testament story. When Garfield asked Weaver on the House floor to identify himself in the drawing, Weaver replied: "The large figure with the long ears, of course, represents me. You know that the ass in the Bible saw the angel before Balaam, his rider, saw him."

The jovial exchange suggests that Garfield's initial suspicion of the Greenbacks had begun to lessen.

Since arriving in Washington, Weaver had worked to keep lines of communication with the Republicans open, often siding with them when it suited his purposes. This proved crucial as signs of a break in the standoff multiplied. Voicing growing weariness with the controversy, the *Washington Post* editorialized that if Randall had only recognized Weaver, "the wheels of legislation would doubtless have moved on without jar or friction." In early April rumors circulated—apparently with Randall's approval—that Weaver finally would be recognized and allowed to present his resolution. But Weaver knew this was only half the battle. To get the roll-call vote he wanted, he would need more support than the small Greenback caucus could provide. Without additional backing, Weaver recalled, the likelihood of a recorded vote was "exceedingly dark."

Weaver then approached Garfield with an audacious proposal. Weaver pointed out that Republicans had long opposed the Greenback monetary program, and that many Democrats waffled on the issue, supporting currency expansion at home but backing contraction on Capitol Hill. A recorded vote, Weaver suggested, would pin down Democrats and allow Republicans to go on record against the Greenback measures. "We asked him," Weaver recounted years later, "if he could not, in view of these facts, assist in securing a yea or nay vote?"

With another bitter presidential campaign looming, this appeal to Garfield's partisan instincts could not have been more perfectly timed. Only a year earlier, Garfield had implacably opposed any dealing with the Greenbacks. Now he found that Weaver's proposal, which offered the prospect of sowing dissension among Democrats, merited consideration. Garfield "replied that he would consult with his colleagues and give us an answer that afternoon," Weaver wrote. "In the course of an hour he reported that his side of the House would join in the demand for a record of the vote."

Ending the long standoff, Randall recognized Weaver on Monday, April 5, as he stood to offer his two-part resolution. As promised, Garfield interceded on Weaver's behalf when objections were raised to proceeding, and the House, with many members abstaining, voted 81 to 27 to continue. The debate for which Weaver had agitated since early January was finally under way.

Garfield took full advantage of the opportunity to declaim against the Greenbacks. He charged that Weaver's resolution would put undreamed-of power in the hands of the government if it, rather than the

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Using the Nast cartoon to his advantage, Weaver declared that it had "grossly slandered" the Speaker of the House, because it portrayed him "standing with his back to me, when in fact the most that he had ever done was to shut his eyes."

banks, regulated currency volume. Paying off government obligations as quickly as possible was an irresponsible formula for inflation. Garfield concluded with a burst of indignation that must have rung hollow to those aware of his role in bringing the measure to the floor. "This monster is to be let loose on the country as the last spawn of the dying party that thought it had a little life in it a year ago," he thundered melodramatically. "Let both parties show their courage by meeting boldly and putting an end to its power for mischief."

Weaver fired back. "Who shall issue the currency and control its volume?" he demanded. "That I say is the colossal issue, and in it is involved the very existence of this Government and the freedom of the people." He scoffed at accusations by Garfield of dictatorial "centralism," noting that the Greenbacks favored putting currency under the control of the democratically elected Congress, whereas Garfield believed "bankers . . . who are not chosen by the people, or elected by them, are to be trusted with this great power involving the happiness and welfare of fifty millions of people."

Weaver's eloquence failed to carry the day. The resolution was defeated, 117 to 84. Most votes in favor of the measure came from Greenbacks and southern and midwestern Democrats, while Republicans supplied most of the opposition. Significantly, 91 members, including 48 Democrats and 40 Republicans, did not vote. This suggests that Weaver's belief that Democrats preferred to avoid monetary issues was correct, but also indicates that many Republicans were uncomfortable with the resolution as well. Noting that he had won recognition but lost the debate, the *Washington Post* called it "Weaver's Paradoxical Success." Yet the episode could hardly be called a defeat. Despite the resistance of its leadership, the House had debated the central tenets of the Greenback program. The vote had measured support for the Greenback monetary position among rank-and-file Democrats and foreshadowed divisions that would dominate American politics in the next two decades.

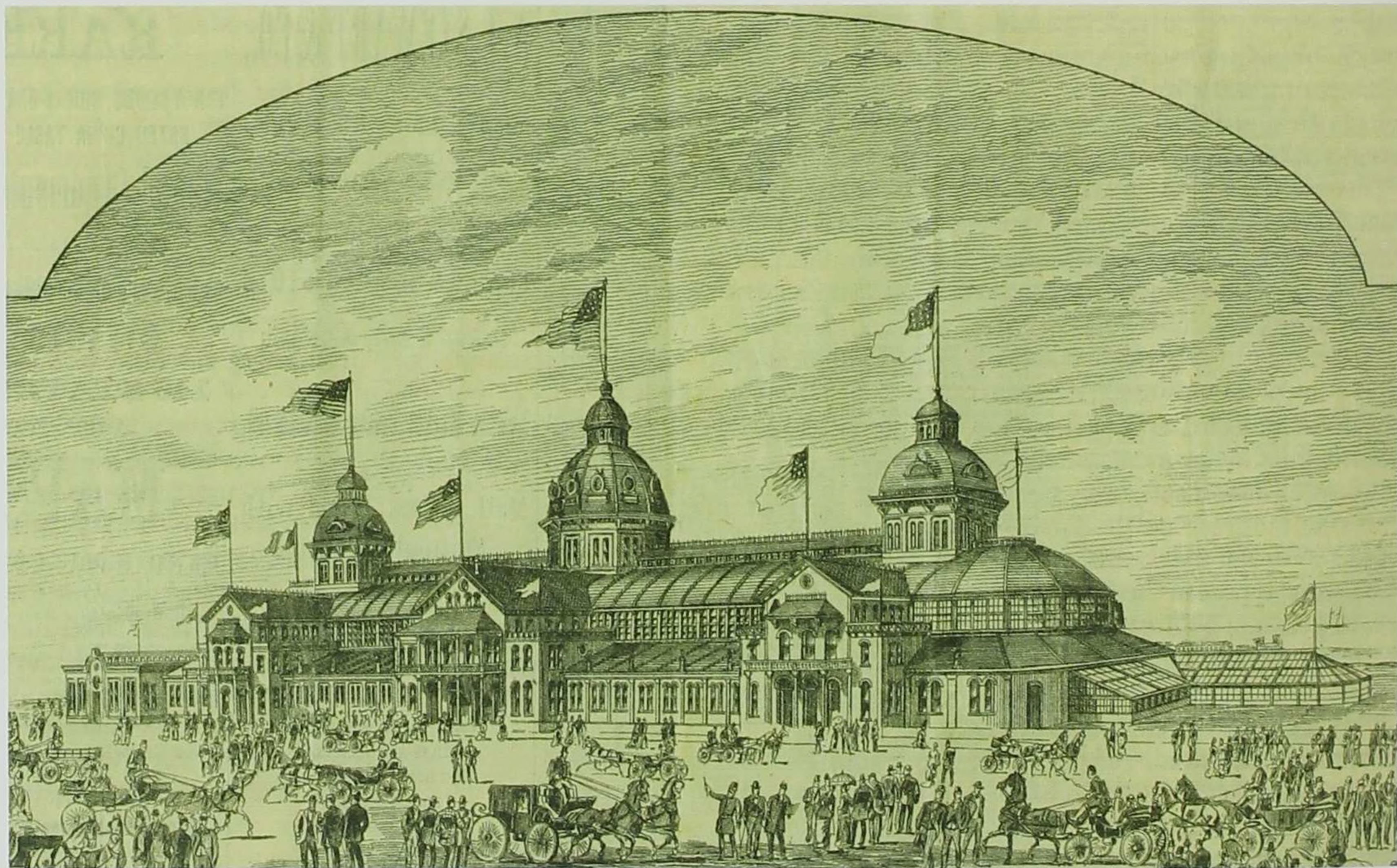
Referring to Garfield's characterization of the Greenbacks, the *New York Times* observed sourly: "The 'dying party' mustered 42 per cent of the entire vote cast. Among these were 50 per cent of the Democratic votes in the House, and 60 per cent of all the votes from the South. . . . Politically, and with reference to its sectional distribution, the vote was extremely significant." Moreover, the lengthy controversy put the Greenback Party, its economic platform, and its leading spokesman at the center of the national political debate on the eve of the presidential campaign. Weaver's perseverance, political acumen, and love for the cut-and-thrust of debate had served the insurgent movement well.

Weaver's prominence ideally positioned him as the Greenback standard-bearer when the party met in Chicago in June to pick a presidential nominee. Talk of a bid by Weaver had begun not long after he first arrived in Washington in early 1879. Now he left no doubt that the nomination was on his mind. He told the *Post* in February that the Greenbacks "shall nominate a third ticket in any event. We expect nothing from either the Republican or Democratic parties. The people demand relief, and we cannot get it from Congress. Now we propose to appeal to the people."

Behind-the-scenes maneuvering intensified as the convention approached. Weaver and Gillette met with Illinois Senator David Davis to discuss the campaign. Weaver recalled in *A Call to Action* that he and Gillette urged the corpulent Davis, a political independent and longtime associate of Abraham Lincoln, to accept the party's nomination, but Davis declined. Whether Weaver and Gillette met with him to encourage his candidacy or simply ascertain his intentions, the Illinois senator's lack of interest meant that the only candidate with a national reputation rivaling Weaver's was Benjamin Butler of Massachusetts, whose prominent record as a Civil War Union general made him a highly controversial figure in the South.

On June 9, Greenback delegates filed into Chicago's Exposition Hall, where only one day earlier exhausted Republicans had concluded a marathon 36-ballot nominating convention by picking Garfield as their presidential candidate. Portraits of Lincoln, Thaddeus Stevens, and other Republican heroes still hung in the hall as the Greenbacks gathered. The often chaotic Greenback assemblage included Denis Kearney, leader of the anti-Asian Workingman's Party of California, woman-suffrage champion Susan B. Anthony, and a delegation from the Socialist Labor Party. Reflecting this motley assortment of re-





Chicago's Exposition Hall was the site of the 1880 National Republican Convention. A day after Republican delegates departed, having nominated James Garfield and Chester Arthur, the National Greenback Convention began in the same building.

formers, idealists, and demagogues, the convention adopted a platform that called for Chinese immigration restrictions, universal suffrage, a graduated income tax, and prohibition of child labor.

When delegates finally got around to selecting a presidential candidate, it became apparent that support for Benjamin Butler was limited. In the early morning hours of June 11, on an informal first ballot, Weaver stood almost 100 votes ahead of Representative Hendrick Wright of Pennsylvania, and Butler ran a distant fourth. Weaver's advantage quickly turned into a stampede. "Before the announcement of the first ballot, it became evident that Weaver had a clear majority, and all the delegates hastened to change their votes to that candidate," the *New York Times* reported. "Motions sprang from every part of the convention to make his nomination unanimous, and just as the sun shone through the eastern windows, the result of the ballot was announced as 718 for James B. Weaver . . . and without any motion his nomination was made unanimous." The convention then nominated B. J. Chambers of Texas for vice president, pairing a southerner with a Union

army veteran at the top of the ticket. "At 6 a.m.," the *Times* reported, "Gen. Weaver came into the hall, apparently fresh after a good night's sleep, and accepted the nomination which a sleepless convention tendered to him."

In his formal acceptance statement, Weaver endorsed the party's platform as "comprehensive, reasonable, and progressive." He also signaled his intention to actively campaign for votes and in so doing break with a tradition of 19th-century politics. Presidential nominees typically stayed close to home, reluctant to appear too eager to hold the highest office in the land, content to address visiting delegations and leave the campaigning to state party leaders. This approach did not suit Greenback needs. "In consequence of the great avenues to public opinion . . . being mainly under the control of the enemies of our movement, [the Greenback convention] thought it proper to request its candidates visit various sections of the Union and talk to the people. It is my intention," Weaver added, "to comply with this request to the extent of my ability."

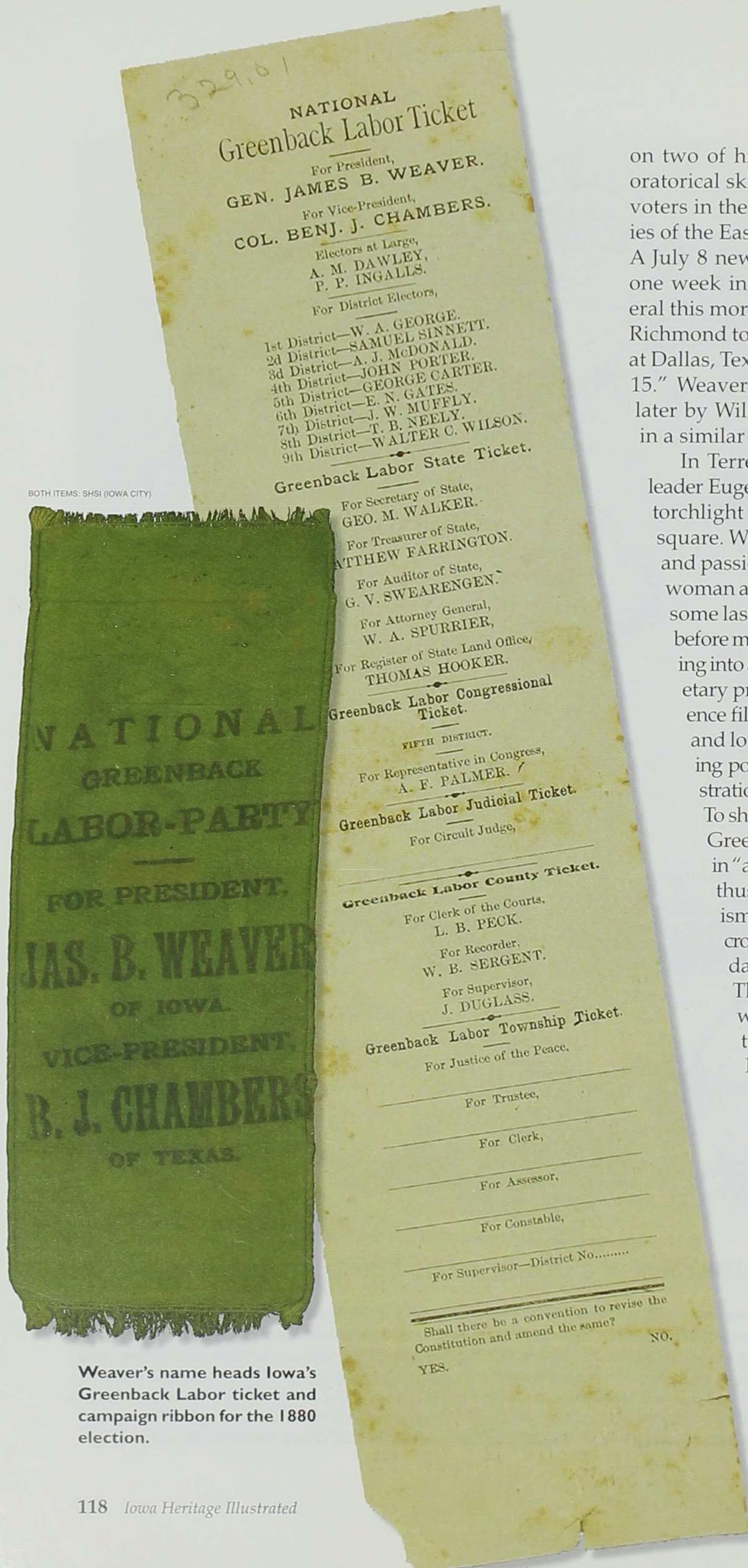
During the summer and fall of 1880, Weaver drew



**What the Different Political parties are Doing in the Presidential Campaign.**

A rare political cartoon in the *Legal Tender Greenback* (Bloomfield, Iowa) spells out the differences between the Democratic, Republican, and Greenback presidential nominees: "Garfield has a spade and is digging up issues twenty years dead—the bloody shirt, fear of rebel claims, etc. [Winfield Scott] Hancock has stuck a pick-ax into the bag of Republican official corruption, and the foul matter spurts out and besmears Garfield from head to foot. Weaver (the people's champion), with a record as clean as the driven snow, goes forth and with arguments unanswerable pleads the cause of the people and in masterly efforts proclaims the principles of a Franklin with the eloquence of a Patrick Henry. The work of Weaver insures the final triumph of Truth and the safety of the Home and Factory. The seed HE is sowing will in due time give us a harvest of Good Will, Peace and Plenty."

LEGAL TENDER GREENBACK, 1021/1860



BOTH ITEMS: SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Weaver's name heads Iowa's Greenback Labor ticket and campaign ribbon for the 1880 election.

on two of his greatest resources—ample energy and oratorical skill—to take the Greenback case directly to voters in the railroad hubs of the Midwest, the big cities of the East, and the cotton fields of the Deep South. A July 8 newspaper report from New York described one week in his campaign's frenetic pace: "The General this morning left for Washington. He will speak in Richmond to-night and go thence to Alabama, arriving at Dallas, Texas, in time for the great meeting there July 15." Weaver's example would be emulated 16 years later by William Jennings Bryan, who courted voters in a similar nationwide campaign.

In Terre Haute, Indiana, the hometown of labor leader Eugene Debs, Greenback supporters paraded by torchlight with a marching band to the courthouse square. Weaver seemed slightly flustered by the size and passion of the crowd. "I do wish that every man, woman and child would keep still for I want to leave some lasting impression on the minds of the people before me," he exclaimed in frustration before launching into a detailed explanation of the Greenback monetary program. At Faneuil Hall in Boston, the audience filled "every available inch of standing, sitting and lounging room" and "emphasized every telling point made by the gallant general with demonstrations of enthusiasm," the *Boston Globe* reported. To shouts of approval, Weaver proclaimed that the Greenback Party had buried the "Bloody Shirt" in "a grave between Mason and Dixon's line" and thus would not stir up North/South sectionalism left from the Civil War. In New York, a large crowd serenaded him with "God bless our candidates" to the tune of "God Save the Queen." The energetic campaign enraged Democrats who viewed Weaver's candidacy as a threat to their candidate, General Winfield Scott Hancock. The *Washington Post*, which was supporting Hancock, called Weaver "the assistant Republican candidate for the Presidency" who "has satisfactorily proved himself in the last month to be a foul-mouthed demagogue and an unconscionable liar."

Despite the excitement he generated on the campaign trail, Weaver's candidacy faltered almost as soon as it began. Shortly after receiving the vice-presidential nomination, Chambers fell off a railway platform and sat out the rest of the campaign at home to recuperate. In the South, Weaver's hope of winning support from both white and black voters encountered resistance from conserva-

tive Democrats who in many locations obstructed or threw out Greenback votes by blacks. As recounted in the *New York Times*, Weaver complained during his appearance at the Cooper Institute that southern Democrats "didn't think it a crime in the old slavery days to deprive a black man of his liberty, and now they didn't think it so very wrong to rob him of his vote." Weaver also faced allegations from Democrats and Greenback dissidents that his campaign was intended to throw support to Garfield. Weaver angrily denied the charges—"I defy all traitors in Christendom to injure me in the least"—but the accusations threw him on the defensive and became the basis for attacks throughout the campaign. Most significantly, historian Ray Ginger has concluded, the economy improved. Following crop failures in Europe, U.S. wheat prices revived, jumping in 1879 from 78 cents to \$1.11 per bushel. "Wheat farmers prospered, and in the north the Greenback Party collapsed."

**F**rom the Greenback standpoint, the results of Weaver's 1880 presidential campaign were mixed. On the one hand, he received more than 300,000 votes—almost four times the number for the party's 1876 presidential nominee. On the other hand, he did not come close to carrying a single state. The defeat might have seemed a setback to many, but Weaver professed optimism. "We did not expect to elect our presidential candidate, but we expected to establish ourselves as a party to be respected," he declared. The *New York Times* unhappily concurred that the new party's platform possessed staying power: "Greenbackism as an independent movement has a possible

future that cannot safely be ignored" and added that "forces are working silently, but steadily and constantly, in its favor which may have to be reckoned with by the time another great national contest approaches." The *Times* proved prescient. Although the Greenback Party collapsed before the end of the 1880s, it was the forerunner of the Populist Party, which altered the political landscape in the 1890s.

As for Weaver, he remained active on the Iowa political scene. He ran for governor in 1883 and won two more terms in Congress in 1884 and 1886. Taking stock of his continued power at the polls, Iowa Republicans invited him to rejoin the party in exchange for "any position that I might desire," he recalled. But his break with the party was permanent and he declined the offer. In 1892, he mounted a second presidential bid, this time as the nominee of the Populists, and carried four states. By 1896, the Populist and Democratic parties were closely allied, sharing presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan as well as positions on monetary policy and other issues.

As the *Times* had predicted, 1880 was only the beginning. Weaver—Iowa's "untamed Greenbacker"—and the movement that he led during his first term in Congress would indeed have to be "reckoned with" before the century ended. ♦

*Robert B. Mitchell is a 1980 graduate of Grinnell College. He wrote "'Get Ready for '96': The Decatur County Press, Partisanship, and the Presidential Campaign of 1896" for the Fall 2003 Iowa Heritage Illustrated. His biography of Weaver, Skirmisher: The Life, Times and Political Career of James B. Weaver of Iowa, will be published in spring 2008 by Edinborough Press. Mitchell is an editor with the Los Angeles Times-Washington Post News Service and lives in Woodbridge, Virginia.*

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

James B. Weaver was a prolific author and speaker whose writings and speeches offer the best insights into his personality and beliefs. As a member of Congress, Weaver's remarks on the House floor are recorded in the *Congressional Record*. Many of Weaver's other speeches, as well as his correspondence with his wife, Clara, can be found in the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa in Des Moines. Microfilm of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Iowa State Register*, and other newspapers provide another rich source of material on Weaver and his career. Particularly useful is the *Legal Tender Greenback* of Bloomfield, Iowa. Weaver's Populist manifesto, *A Call to Action: An Interpretation of the Great Uprising, Its Source and Causes* (Des Moines: Iowa Printing Co., 1892) illustrates his rhetorical style and the religious origins of his political beliefs. The book also gives some background on the events of his Greenback period. The articles he wrote for the *World Review*, a weekly survey of world and national events published in Chicago at the turn of the 20th century, contain valuable material on Weaver's life and insights into the politicians he knew.

*The Diary of James A. Garfield*, ed. Harry James Brown, Frederick D. Williams (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1981), vol. 4, details the behind-the-scenes maneuvering in the 46th Congress as witnessed by the Republican leader and future president. The monetary issues that Weaver championed as a Greenback can be maddeningly arcane, but two works are particularly illuminating: *Goldbugs and Greenbacks: The Antimonopoly Tradition and the Politics of Finance in America*, by Gretchen

Ritter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, by Ray Allen Billington (New York: Macmillan, 1975). Billington's work is also useful as a general guide to the period. Helpful on Iowa and national history are *Iowa: A History*, by Joseph Frazier Wall (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978); *A History of Iowa*, by Leland L. Sage (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974); and *The Age of Excess: The United States from 1877 to 1914*, by Ray Ginger (New York: Macmillan, 1974).

Weaver has been the subject of a biography, *James Baird Weaver*, by Fred Emory Haynes (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1919); and two articles by Thomas Burnell Colbert ("Political Fusion in Iowa: The Election of James B. Weaver to Congress in 1878," *Arizona and the West*, Spring 1978, and "Disgruntled 'Chronic Politician' or Man of Political Integrity: James Baird Weaver and the Republican Party in Iowa, 1857-1877," *Annals of Iowa*, Winter/Spring, 1988). Sage wrote what remains the most complete account of Weaver's failed bid for the 1875 Republican gubernatorial nomination, "Weaver in Allison's Way," in the January 1953 *Annals of Iowa*.

Weaver's 1880 presidential campaign is the subject of a recent book by Mark A. Lause, *The Civil War's Last Campaign: James B. Weaver, the Greenback-Labor Party & the Politics of Race and Section* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2001).

Annotations to the author's original manuscript are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (State Historical Society of Iowa-Iowa City).