

BEN SAMUELS IN THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION OF 1860

By Owen Peterson

In Iowa, as in most of the other states of the new West, Republicanism and antislavery sentiment were making notable inroads on Democratic strength in the late 1850's. The principal question confronting the Democrats, and the nation in general, had for some time been that of slavery in the territories. In the ten years following the Compromise of 1850 the question had grown increasingly vexatious and complex. In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska bill, authored by Stephen A. Douglas, revived the question and introduced popular sovereignty as a doctrine for settlement of territorial slave problems. This policy permitted the territorial legislatures to decide for themselves the status of slavery within their borders.

During these years Democrats of the Northwest, who found it difficult to secure election to office and who hoped to pacify their constituents while avoiding the radicalism of the Republicans, rallied to the call of popular sovereignty. Southern Democrats at first accepted this principle with enthusiasm, but political rivalry within the party was leading to disaster.

In 1856, at their convention in Cincinnati, Democrats sought to end the growing hostility within the party fold with a platform satisfactory to both factions.¹ It had seemed an amicable settlement of differences in the convention, but when presented to the people it became one of the most controversial platforms in Democratic history. Southerners went back to their homes and interpreted the resolutions as a guarantee for the institution of slavery, while Northern Democrats construed it as a permit for the territorial legislatures to enact whatever provisions they deemed desirable.

In spite of these differences the Democracy triumphed in the national elections that year. However, throughout the administration of James Buchanan, from 1857 to 1861, the debate was continued on the stump, in Congress, and in state conventions. The activities of the Emigrant Aid

¹ For the crucial plank of this platform, endorsing the Southern position on state rights and the Kansas-Nebraska Act as "the only sound and safe solution of the slavery question," see Roy F. Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York, 1948), Appendix.

Societies, which gave financial assistance to Northerners wishing to emigrate into the territories, the petitions from abolitionist New England which flooded Congress, and the denunciations of slavery from Northern pulpits antagonized the Southerner and widened the breach. In 1857 came the Dred Scott decision which declared, in effect, that Congress could not prohibit slavery in the territories. Douglas' popular sovereignty stand endorsed by Northern Democrats, was tossed aside by Southern Democrats, who now based their position firmly on the decision of the Supreme Court. Thus, the Dred Scott case split the Democratic party in two. The climax to the controversy came in 1860 at two disastrous Democratic national conventions, held in Charleston and Baltimore.

The Iowa delegation to the convention in 1860 included Augustus Caesar Dodge of Burlington, D. A. Finch of Des Moines, William H. Merritt of Cedar Rapids, T. W. Clagett of Keokuk, W. H. M. Pusey of Council Bluffs, J. W. Bosler of Sioux City, E. H. Thayer of Muscatine, and Benjamin M. Samuels of Dubuque. Samuels, a young Democrat of growing importance in his state and a speaker of high regard, was one of the leading spokesmen for the pro-Douglas platform calling for non-intervention by Congress in territorial legislation on slavery. In the crucial debate at Charleston Samuels was selected by the Douglas phalanx to present the viewpoint of the Northwestern delegates. This event climaxed Samuels' brief political career, for with the fall of his party, the rise of Republicanism throughout the North, and his untimely death in 1863, this was the nearest that Samuels came to national political fame.

In accounting for Ben Samuels' prominence as a speaker and politician, it is necessary to understand his background and environment, his character, and his oratorical skills. He was born in Parkersburg, Virginia (now West Virginia), on December 21, 1823. Ben's father, Joseph H. Samuels, came from Shenandoah County, Virginia, where his family had long been influential. Joseph Samuels was the son of Judge Isaac Samuels and the brother of Green Berry Samuels, Congressman and State Supreme Court Justice. The family had lived in the vicinity of Woodstock and Mt. Jackson since before the Revolutionary War, and several of the Samuels had fought both in the Revolution and the War of 1812. The family was large and one of the most illustrious in the valley. At some unknown date between 1823 and 1833 Joseph Samuels and his family returned to Shenandoah County.

It is probable that young Ben received his early education at Woodstock Academy, since the Samuels family had taken an active part in the promotion and establishment of that school. Woodstock, like most other schools of that time, offered the student training in the classics and sciences as well as in the traditional three R's. The cultural and literary interests of his family undoubtedly also had an influence on the boy during these years. Upon completion of his preparatory education, Samuels entered Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) at Lexington, Virginia, and three years later was graduated with class honors. He immediately returned to Woodstock and began the study of law under his father. The availability of the large Samuels library and the assistance of his father, grandfather, and uncle, all eminent lawyers and judges, must have afforded the aspiring young man a unique advantage in his studies. In 1844 he was admitted to the bar.²

Further insight into the caliber of Samuels' education is found in newspaper comments that he "read considerably," was a man of "literary attainments," and that he was likely, on occasion, to intersperse his legal arguments with literary allusions and quotations. Samuels' interest in literary matters found an outlet in the Mt. Jackson Literary Society which he helped to organize in 1844. He also was active in the establishment of the Shenandoah I.O.O.F. Lodge in 1847.³

In the fall of 1847 the young Samuels emigrated to Iowa and settled in the city of Dubuque, where he opened a law practice in partnership with William Vandever. His ability and eloquence soon won him an extensive practice, and he became noted as an advocate. The defense in the more important criminal trials in the county usually was entrusted to him. In 1850 he was named Democratic county committeeman and shortly thereafter elected city attorney for Dubuque. He was re-elected to this office for three successive one-year terms, filling it satisfactorily "both as an able lawyer and a discreet and honorable man." At the same time he also served as a member of the Common Council of the city of Dubuque. In

² John W. Wayland, *A History of Shenandoah County, Virginia* (Strasburg, Virginia, 1927), 195, 245, 251-3, 263, 290-91, 429, 559-60, 638; Franklin T. Oldt, *History of Dubuque County, Iowa* (Chicago, 1911), 451, 635; *Dubuque Times*, Aug. 28, 1857, Aug. 21, 1863.

³ *Dubuque Times*, Aug. 28, 1857, Aug. 21, 1863; Wayland, *History of Shenandoah County* . . . , 290-91; Edward H. Stiles, "Prominent Men of Early Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* (third series), 10:262-3 (January-April, 1912).

1854 Samuels was elected a representative to the Iowa General Assembly and, in 1857, was nominated for Governor by the Democratic party.

Samuels stumped the state, declared himself an anti-bank man, and insisted that the banking law be submitted to the people for ratification. Despite the often highly partisan bias of newspaper accounts of that era, we can get a glimpse of Samuels' character and habits from them. The *Iowa City Crescent*, a Democratic newspaper and so, of course, favorable to the party's representative, commented, "In private life, Mr. Samuels sustains a most estimable character. As a husband and father and a consistent member of the Christian church, the record of his life is without a stain." The *Iowa State Journal*, a Democratic organ also, observed in 1857, "Mr. Samuels was not, we are frank to say, our first choice in the convention, yet when nominated, we are satisfied with the result. . . . [He] is a Democrat whose record is clean — a man of moral, temperate habits, a religious man — and a man of talent, energy and comprehensive views." In subsequent articles, the *Journal* described him as "energetic," "bold, fearless, and honest," and observed that "his frankness and candor is apparent to everyone who hears him." The *Oskaloosa Times* echoed these remarks.⁴

While these favorable evaluations from the presses of political allies are to be expected, when confirmed by the opposition they begin to take on weight. The *Dubuque Times*, which opposed Samuels throughout the campaign of 1857 on the ground that, while he was a respectable citizen, "no one ever dreamed that he was a suitable candidate for Governor of the State of Iowa," observed:

Personally we have a high regard for him. In social life he is a rare good fellow — the nucleus of mirth and a ring-leader in everything that heightens one's joy and makes him think better of his fellow men. In these qualities he has few superiors in the city. Professionally he stands among the leading members of the bar in the county. He has a good legal mind. . . . His intellect is good. . . . He stands well in the community as a citizen, lawyer, and a man of integrity.

After Samuels' defeat in 1857, the same paper commented, "Had there not been principles at stake involving the interests of the State and humanity, we could have desired a more general support of our fellow towns-

⁴ *Iowa City Crescent*, Sept. 1, 1857; *Des Moines Iowa State Journal*, Sept. 5, 19, 1857; Aug. 20, 1859; *Oskaloosa Times*, May 24, 1860.

man, for he is a good fellow." Still later, the *Times* observed that he had a "great heart. He was magnanimous to everybody but himself."⁵ The *Iowa City Republican*, in 1860, spoke favorably of both Samuels and his opponent, former law partner Vandever, after a debate in that city. The "courteous, gentlemanly and dignified" conduct of the speakers "not only added to their reputation as debaters and statesmen, but set an example worthy of imitation."⁶ Perhaps the warmest commentary on Samuels' character is the simple but direct statement of James W. Grimes: "Of the Democratic nominee I have nothing to say. I believe Mr. Samuels to be an honorable man."⁷

Although defeated by Ralph P. Lowe in the election, the party turned to Samuels again in 1858 as its candidate for the office of United States Senator, a purely honorary choice, since the Republican control of the Iowa General Assembly assured the choice of a Republican Senator at that session. This action was significant, however, because it was an open repudiation by Iowa Democrats of the Buchanan administration. George W. Jones, the incumbent and Samuels' leading opponent in the nomination fight, had long been an ardent supporter of the Administration. But Iowa Democrats were looking toward the nomination of Stephen A. Douglas, Buchanan's opponent. Samuels was, of course, defeated for the Senatorship by ex-Governor James W. Grimes by a margin of twenty-three votes in the Seventh General Assembly. After these setbacks, Samuels returned to his practice in Dubuque until 1860 when he was nominated as the Democratic candidate for United States Representative from his district and was also named a delegate to the Democratic national convention.⁸

The diversity of Samuels' many political and speaking activities — in the courts, as city attorney, before the state legislature, and as a stump speaker in behalf of his own candidacy as well as that of others⁹ — af-

⁵ Dubuque *Times*, Aug. 28, Oct. 10, 1857; Aug. 21, 1863.

⁶ *Iowa City Republican*, Sept. 12, 1860.

⁷ Circular letter written by J. W. Grimes, Sept. 3, 1857, from William Salter, *The Life of James W. Grimes* (New York, 1876), 100.

⁸ Oldt, *History of Dubuque County . . .*, 635; Louis Pelzer, "The History of Political Parties in Iowa from 1857 to 1860," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS*, 7:182, 190 (April, 1909); *Annals of Iowa* (third series), 1:236 (October, 1893); *Iowa City Crescent*, Sept. 1, 1857; *Dubuque Times*, Aug. 21, 1863; Benjamin F. Gue, *History of Iowa* (4 vols., New York, 1903), 1:274-5, 355.

⁹ During the campaign of 1859 Samuels made forty-five major campaign addresses in six weeks. *Des Moines Iowa State Journal*, Aug. 20, 1859.

forded the rising young politico a wide range of speech situations and experiences. From such circumstances arose Henry Clay, Stephen A. Douglas, and other leading statesmen of the era. As preparation for his role at Charleston this training had been excellent.

Of Samuels' appearance, there is general agreement on his handsomeness. Even his political opponents begrudgingly acknowledged this: one Republican editor sardonically noted in the campaign of 1860 that, "He possesses a *fine physique*," and another believed that, "He was doubtless selected by the Convention because of his personal appearance."¹⁰ Samuels was described as being "of striking personal appearance, with a tall athletic form, a smooth shaven oval face, and brown hair." "In person he is a large and well-proportioned man;" "his appearance on the platform [is] imposing."¹¹ He was also a young man; at thirty-five he had run for Governor; he had been a candidate for United States Senator at thirty-seven; at the time of the Charleston convention he was only thirty-eight.

Samuels was famous as a speaker in Iowa by 1860. This reputation was not derived from any single field of endeavor, for as a lawyer, legislator, and campaigner he excelled. As a lawyer he was recognized as "one of the most brilliant orators among the old bar," and "one of the most eloquent as well as one of the ablest members of the Iowa bar."¹²

As a legislator, Samuels likewise was prominent. One of his contemporaries in the House of the Fifth General Assembly recalled, "Ben M. Samuels, of Dubuque [was] the leading Democratic member. . . . Samuels, until then unknown outside of Dubuque, soon in flights of oratory soared to distinction. . . . He was too well equipped as a speaker for anyone in the House to cope on even ground." This same legislator, in comparing the two houses of the General Assembly, concluded, "in point of brilliance, the House, on account of the splendor of Samuels, obscured the Senate."¹³

Newspapers of the era, especially the Democratic journals, abound with

¹⁰ Iowa City *Republican*, Sept. 12, 1860; Dubuque *Times*, Aug. 28, 1857.

¹¹ Iowa City *Republican*, Sept. 12, 1860; Dubuque *Times*, Aug. 28, 1857; Aug. 21, 1863.

¹² Edward H. Stiles, "Judge John F. Dillon," *Annals of Iowa* (third series), 9:12 (April, 1909); Stiles, "Prominent Men of Early Iowa," 262-3; Oldt, *History of Dubuque County* . . ., 451.

¹³ "The Fifth Legislature Recalled," *Iowa Historical Record*, 1:81, 86 (April, 1885).

praise of Samuels' skill in handling campaign audiences as he stumped the state during his short political career. In the campaign of 1857 reporters termed his speeches "brief, appropriate, eloquent and powerful." Samuels was said to be "an able canvasser, a speaker of more than ordinary ability, eloquence and tact," "an able speaker — ready, fluent, and eloquent — yet argumentative and clear upon all points." One newspaper called his speech "as complete and finished a specimen of rich, thrilling and polished oratory as it was ever our pleasure to hear."¹⁴ In 1859 Samuels was eulogized as "one of the most eloquent and convincing speakers in the State," "probably the most talented and eloquent speaker in the state of Iowa." The *Oskaloosa Times* reported that when the "Great Commoner of Iowa" closed his speech, "one long, loud, involuntary shout of applause arose from the multitude in approbation of the great truths so appropriately uttered."¹⁵

Not all accounts were so enthusiastic, however. The Republican press, understandably, was considerably more critical of Samuels' speaking efforts. The *Dubuque Times* criticized his participation in a political debate:

His mein from the start was that of a fancied superior — his very first sentence contained an ill-natured, ungentlemanly, grossly offensive allusion to his antagonist. . . . Hon. Ben M. Samuels is a political opponent of ours, but with no other feeling than that of neighborly kindness, we tell him that he has a consequential, dogmatic, dictatorial manner.¹⁶

In another debate, however, the *Iowa City Republican* went so far as to admit that in some respects — "the graces and flourishes of oratory" — Samuels was the superior of his Republican opponent.¹⁷ In spite of the dissenting voice of his political opponents, the preponderance of evidence suggests that Samuels was a speaker of extraordinary ability.

Little information concerning Samuels' actual mode of speech delivery has survived. It is said that he spoke in "a clear, stentorian voice . . . the tones of his manly voice rang out on the air." "His clear, deliberate form of speech, delivered slowly, but without hesitation and with an air of confidence and candor, carried conviction." One contemporary noted:

¹⁴ *Des Moines Iowa State Journal*, Sept. 5, 1857; Appanoose *Chieftain*, quoted in *Iowa State Journal*, Oct. 3, 1857.

¹⁵ *Oskaloosa Times*, Sept. 8, 22, 1859. See also *Dubuque Herald*, May 5, July 11, 1860.

¹⁶ *Dubuque Times*, quoted in *Iowa City Republican*, Aug. 15, 1860.

¹⁷ *Iowa City Republican*, Sept. 12, 1860.

He possessed a splendid voice for either forensic debate or political speaking. He had a remarkable command of language. His manner was deliberate at first, but as he warmed with his subject, he became impassioned, his gestures vehement, yet always graceful, every word came out clear and full (he never paused for one), and he delighted in similes and illustrations.¹⁸

Discussion of his "energetic," "forcible," "powerful," "bold," and "impressive manner" lend added support to the conclusion that Samuels' speech was vigorous and moving.

In addition to an effective delivery, Samuels was adept in handling hecklers — a highly important skill in the rough and tumble politics of the time. The *Dubuque Herald*, in relating an incident when Samuels had disposed of a particularly noisy and troublesome dissenter, concluded, "Ben is never more in his element than when repelling insults, as he proved conclusively on this occasion."¹⁹

These then were skills which Ben Samuels carried with him into the political welter at Charleston in 1860: a good education, wide experience before a variety of audiences, legal acumen and training, skill in legislative debate and parliamentary maneuvering, a good voice, and an effective and vigorous speech delivery. "With all these qualifications, his name went before him and wherever he was announced to address the people, crowds flocked to hear him."²⁰ His battles well equipped him for the political skirmish in which the Democracy was to become involved at Charleston.

The Democrats in 1860 had split sectionally on the issue of whether Congress had the right to intervene in order to protect slaveholders going into the United States territories. Southern Democrats maintained that the Dred Scott decision of 1857 recognized the right of slaveholders to carry slaves, labeled by the decision as property, into the territories. They urged the party to incorporate this doctrine into its platform. The Northern Democrats rallied around Stephen A. Douglas and his doctrine of popular sovereignty — the right of each territory to determine for itself the status of slavery — and claimed that this had been the true meaning of the Cincinnati platform of 1856.

The convention site in 1860 was particularly ill-chosen, since Charles-

¹⁸ Oskaloosa *Times*, Sept. 22, 1859; "The Fifth Legislature Recalled," 81; *Dubuque Times*, Aug. 21, 1863.

¹⁹ *Dubuque Herald*, May 5, 1860.

²⁰ *Dubuque Times*, Aug. 21, 1863.

tonians were probably stronger in their loyalty to the South and reverence for the institution of slavery than almost any other group of Southerners. Fired by the editorials of Robert Barnwell Rhett in the *Charleston Mercury*, aroused by the speeches of Southern leaders during the convention, the citizenry of South Carolina filled the galleries of old Institute Hall to capacity and exerted a tremendous pressure upon the convention. During the first five days of the meeting, the feelings of the delegates had been fired to a feverous pitch of excitement as both sections sought to win victories in the procedural disputes over the seating of contesting delegations and the removal of the unit voting rule.²¹ On the fifth day the resolutions committee made its recommendations for the party platform.

Ben Samuels addressed the national convention on April 29, 1860, the sixth day of the meeting, in defense of the pro-Douglas report of a minority of the resolutions committee, of which he had been a member. The platform had been debated for an entire day before Samuels spoke, with men of such skill and note as William Lowndes Yancey of Alabama, Ethelbert Barksdale of Mississippi, and Henry B. Payne and Senator George Ellis Pugh of Ohio addressing the convention. At the end of the fifth day, the resolutions had been recommitted to the committee. On the next day, W. W. Avery of North Carolina reintroduced the majority-Southern report, almost completely unaltered, and Samuels presented and defended the almost wholly intact minority resolutions.

The principal difference in the reports lay in their recommendations on the status of slavery in the territories. The Southern members of the committee recommended:

That the platform adopted by the Democratic party at Cincinnati be affirmed, with the following explanatory resolutions: First. That the government of a territory organized by an act of Congress is provisional and temporary; and during its existence all citizens of the United States have an equal right to settle with their property in the Territory without their rights, either of person or property, being destroyed or impaired by Congressional or territorial legislation. Second. That it is the duty of the Federal Government, in all its departments, to protect when necessary the rights of persons and property in the territories and wherever else its constitutional authority extends. Third. That when the settlers in a territory having an adequate population form a state constitu-

²¹ See Nichols, *Disruption of American Democracy*, 288-300.

tion, the right of sovereignty commences and, being consummated by admission into the Union, they stand on an equal footing with the people of other states; and the state thus organized ought to be admitted into the Federal Union, whether its constitution recognizes or prohibits the institution of slavery.²²

The minority pro-Douglas report, as read by Samuels, recommended:

That we, the Democracy of the Union, in convention assembled, hereby declare our affirmance of the resolutions unanimously adopted and declared as a platform of principles by the Democratic Convention at Cincinnati in the year 1856, believing that Democratic principles are unchangeable in their nature, when applied to the same subject matters; and we recommend as the only further resolution the following: Inasmuch as differences of opinion exist in the Democratic party as to the nature and extent of the powers of a territorial legislature, and as to the powers and duties of Congress under the Constitution of the United States over the institution of slavery within the territories:

Resolved, That the Democratic party will abide by the decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States on the questions of constitutional law.²³

The over-all pattern of Samuels' speech in defense of the minority resolutions was inductive. He argued that for three reasons the minority report should be adopted in preference to the majority report. He held that the arguments advanced in favor of the majority report were inconsistent and contradictory; that adoption of the majority report would be injurious to the Democratic party in the North and of no material benefit to the South; and that adoption of the minority report would benefit both sections.

His refutation of the arguments advanced in favor of the majority report was accomplished principally by pointing out inconsistencies in the arguments of the opposition. He refuted the charge that the North had refused to surrender its position because of stubbornness by "turning the tables" and suggesting that Southerners had been equally adamant in their own way. He then reaffirmed the Northern stand and argued that Northern Democrats felt that they could not relinquish what were to them fundamental principles. *Reductio ad absurdum* was the weapon employed by Samuels

²² Charleston *Mercury*, April 29, 1860; *Charleston Democratic Papers*, Duke University Library, Durham, N. C.; Murat Halstead, *Caucuses of 1860* (Columbus, 1860), 54-5.

²³ Charleston *Mercury*, April 29, 1860; *Charleston Democratic Papers*, Halstead, *Caucuses of 1860*, 54-5.

in attacking the arguments of the eloquent Yancey. He pointed out that it would seem that the Alabamian declared: "We stand by a principle; we ask for the right; you do not; you have nothing to lose; let us compromise this matter; let us settle it; come over to us and you will then be right." "The most remarkable compromise I have every heard in my life!" observed Samuels.²⁴ A third major Southern argument, the claim that the Dred Scott decision had already determined the status of slavery in the territories, Samuels attempted to refute by setting up a dilemma. He argued: "But gentlemen announce to us that this is a matter already judicially determined. Upon that proposition we take issue with them and deny that it is a judicial determination. But if judicially determined already, I then ask what have you to lose by the resolutions which we offer?"²⁵

Samuels' main constructive arguments — that the majority resolutions would injure the Democratic party in the North without benefiting Southern Democrats, and that adoption of the minority report would result in advantages to both sections — undoubtedly were influenced by his Midwestern environment. Having several times tasted the dregs of defeat at the polls in his home state, he was keenly aware of the dangers of Republicanism. Samuels' concern over the growing strength of Republican sentiment was clearly brought out in a passage of his speech to the convention wherein several Northern Democrats — A. C. Dodge of Iowa, Pugh of Ohio, Charles E. Stuart of Michigan, and William A. Richardson of Illinois — were singled out as examples of men whose political fortunes were being seriously threatened by Southern dominance in the party. On the other hand, he believed that Northern Democrats, if allowed to run on a suitable platform, could achieve victories. In support of this contention, he cited examples of Democratic successes achieved in three Northern states — Wisconsin, Connecticut, and Rhode Island — under the banner of popular sovereignty. Samuels' argument essentially was very simple and practical. He contended that the party had a choice between the election of Black Republicans, if the South continued to insist upon abstractions, or the glorious triumph of the Democracy under the aegis of popular sovereignty. There was no merit in contending for a principle if it meant that the Republicans would win control of the government.

The effectiveness of Samuels' argument probably was considerably dimin-

²⁴ *Charleston Mercury*, April 29, 1860.

²⁵ *Idem.*

ished, however, because of his inability to offer doubting Southerners assurance that the Democrats would win in the North on a Douglas platform. His few scattered examples of Democratic victories in Northern areas were isolated instances and probably were recognized as such by many Southerners. Samuels' failure to appreciate the concrete and tangible importance to the Southerner of Congressional protection of slavery in the territories probably further impaired his argument. Southerners were fighting to retain control of the Democratic party and, through it, the government, as well as a way of life.

Emotionally, Samuels' speech was strong. The tone throughout was that of a grieved man appealing to his Southern brethren for the right to fight the foe. He asked for Southern sympathy for the many Northern Democrats who had gone down to defeat in defense of Southern rights. He sought to reassure the South of the friendship of the Northern Democracy and to strengthen the bonds of affection between the two sections. He pleaded with the South, as one who has known the perils of conflict, to prevent the triumph of "the serpents of Black Republicanism that have by their breathing affected the air and by their slime tracked the earth." He appealed to the patriotism and loyalty of Southerners: "Oh, Gentlemen, I beseech you, as you love your country, and as you respect your friends, fetter us not in this hour — for fetters are fatal to us." In highly emotional language he described the fight of Northern Democrats against Republicanism:

Steady, incessant, vigilant, we have been battling it, gradually forcing it back, breaking its columns; and now when its battalions are reeling — when it is in the agonies of death — when its strength is all gone — when the power is in our hands to take it by the throat and strangle it to death — are our Southern friends to come up and hold our arms? . . . We shrink not from peril. We are ready to assume the full responsibility of the position and we ask you to assign it to us. I care not though Republicans were entrenched in a hold stronger than Sebastopol itself — by the energy, the power, the might of the united Northern Democracy, their fortress will be stormed, their guns will be turned against themselves, and one banner shall be victorious.²⁶

Although Samuels' language may seem ostentatious and excessive to modern readers, this florid style was not out of place in 1860 and probably was quite effective in the highly inflammatory setting at Charleston.

²⁶ *Idem.*

Samuels' awareness of his audience and the prejudices of the Southern delegates is revealed throughout the speech. In response to these feelings, Samuels seems to have made an effort to overcome the biases of his Southern listeners and to establish himself as a man of good character and good will. Frequent quotation of Southern leaders—R. M. T. Hunter and Henry Wise of Virginia, and Howell Cobb of Georgia—appears to have been designed to bridge the gap between the sections. He referred to his birthplace and early education, probably to aid him in winning adherents, and mentioned that although a citizen of the North, he was a "native of the South" and "educated in the school of Virginia politics." He sought to reveal humility: "I do not claim to be more candid than other men, but I do claim to be a plain man who will speak the truth plainly."²⁷ All of these ethical appeals were directed to the Southerners in the audience.

The immediate surface response would indicate that this was a highly successful speech. The *Charleston Mercury* reported that the speech was interrupted eighteen times by cheering and applause. The *New York Times* reporter called it "a powerful, earnest and effective appeal, free from all bitterness, and was listened to with the most marked interest and attention by the Southern members." Iowa newspapers, all of which probably obtained their reports through eastern papers, carried the following accounts of the address: "It is well worthy an attentive perusal, and no man who reads it can fail to see and appreciate the patriotism and ability of the speaker. It commanded the closest attention of the Convention during its delivery and elicited the warmest praise from men of every section," and "Its delivery by Mr. Samuels stamped him as one of the most talented and able statesmen of the great Northwest." Murat Halstead, Cincinnati reporter, was unimpressed, however, and termed it a "pompous stump speech." Since this was Samuels' only important address in the convention, perhaps James G. Blaine's observation that the triumph of the Douglas forces was "skillfully accomplished under the lead of Henry B. Payne, of Ohio, and Benjamin Samuels, of Iowa" gives us some insight into its consequences.²⁸

While the speech was considered an immediate success and a triumph for the Douglas faction, Northerners did not succeed in winning over the

²⁷ *Idem.*

²⁸ *Charleston Mercury*, April 29, 1860; *New York Times*, April 30, 1860; *Oskaloosa Times*, May 17, 24, 1860; Halstead, *Caucuses of 1860*, 56; James G. Blaine, *Twenty Years of Congress* (2 vols., Norwich, Conn., 1884-1886), 1:162.

South. The Northern men succeeded in getting the minority plank inserted in the platform, a victory which resulted in the bolting of the Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, Florida, and Texas delegations. To allow tempers to cool, the remainder of the convention adjourned for six weeks, to meet again in Baltimore in mid-June. Tempers had not cooled, however; at Baltimore Douglas and anti-Douglas Democrats came to an impasse. Again a split took place. Douglas was nominated by the remainder of the original convention — including the votes of Samuels and the Iowa delegation — while the bolters nominated John C. Breckinridge. "Thus was completed the destruction of the national party of Jefferson and Jackson."²⁹

The Democratic defeat at the polls in 1860 led to a further "bolt," this time through the portals of the Union. In view of these subsequent events, can Samuels' speech truly be considered successful? It would seem that, like the actions of many of the Northern delegates, Samuels' speech did as much to widen the breach between the sections as it did to create unity. As a later speech made by Samuels to the citizens of Dubuque upon his return to Iowa suggests, the Iowan entered the fray in a spirit of hostility rather than cooperativeness. His claim that the Northern delegates had stood firm, "determined not to yield to the demands of those who, from hostility to the Union or malignant hatred of Stephen A. Douglas, resorted to every means in their power to destroy the Democratic organization by hoisting upon it a platform which would be repudiated at home" tends to support this.³⁰ Samuels was no longer a Southerner at heart. His interests and political career were inseparably bound with the destiny of the new West. In his thirteen-year absence from Virginia, Samuels had become the advocate of a new way of life. The West had won another convert.

One can only speculate on what might have been Samuels' political fame and success had he lived longer; unfortunately his career ended shortly after his appearance at Charleston. Following the final disruption of the Democracy at Baltimore in May, Samuels, in response to invitations from Democratic committees, gave addresses in Portland, Maine, and at Faneuil Hall, in Boston. Back in Iowa he campaigned for a seat in Congress and lost by about nine thousand votes. Consumption led to his death on August 16, 1863, at the age of forty-one.

²⁹ Nichols, *Disruption of American Democracy*, 320.

³⁰ Dubuque *Herald*, May 5, 1860.