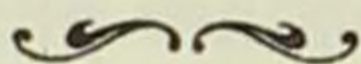


THE PALIMPSEST

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The First State Election

Frontier democracy was party democracy. Although the pioneers were alert to local interests and issues they were even more concerned with party principles. That is, the Whigs were inclined to vote for the candidates of the Whig Party and the Democrats to vote for Democrats, no matter what local issues were involved. The first election in the State of Iowa for administrative and legislative officials was no exception to this rule.

The election of 1846 was complicated because it was involved in the legal machinery which marked the transition of Iowa from a Territory to a State. On August 3, 1846, the people of Iowa had gone to the polls and approved the proposal for a new Constitution and the establishment of a State government. Among the provisions of the basic document was one which required the Governor of the Territory to call a general election within three months after the ratification of the

Constitution. In this election, the voters of the new State were to select a Governor, two Representatives in Congress (unless Congress should authorize only one), an Auditor, a Treasurer, a Secretary of State, and members of a General Assembly. It was further provided that the election of these officials was to be conducted "in accordance with the existing election laws of this Territory".

Although the results of the ratifying election were slow in coming in, Governor James Clarke was satisfied by the end of August that the new Constitution had been adopted, since the votes from the two missing counties (Delaware and Buchanan) were not sufficient to change the result. The final report indicates that the vote was 9580 for the Constitution and 9105 against it.

He did not wait for formal congressional action on the admission of Iowa as a State but followed the provisions of the recently adopted Constitution and on September 9, 1846, he issued a proclamation designating Monday, October 26, 1846, as the day "for the holding of the first general election for the selection of State officers, and members of the first State Legislature." The Governor stipulated that the election was "to be conducted in all respects according to the existing laws of the Territory, except only in such cases as

the same may be found to conflict with the Constitution under which the election will be held."

This meant that the election was to be conducted in accordance with regulations adopted in 1838 by the First Territorial Legislative Assembly. The polls would be open between 9 A. M. and 6 P. M. and during that time an elector could approach "the bar in the election room" and vote "by presenting a ticket, folded in such a manner that no names on said ticket" were visible to the judges. Ballots were provided by the individual voters or by party committees, not by the officials in charge.

Even before Governor Clarke issued his proclamation fixing the date of the election, the two political parties in Iowa began to formulate their plans for the campaign. The Whigs, who had not been as well organized as the Democrats were, began the task of organizing the party in each of the counties. A mass meeting held in Tipton on the afternoon of September 19, 1846, for "effecting a proper organization of the Whig Party in Cedar County" was typical.

Late in August the Whig Central Committee issued a call for all Whigs to meet in a State convention at Iowa City on Friday, September 25th. Each county was to send one delegate for each one hundred voters. As outlined in the call, the

purpose of this convention was to enable "the Whigs of Iowa to express their views and feelings with reference to the great questions of national policy" and to form "a ticket for State officers to be supported at the ensuing election." This call was signed by William Penn Clarke, James Trimble, and James Robinson. The Democratic Party, not to be outdone, planned to hold its convention at the Capitol on Thursday, September 24, 1846.

The party convention system in use in 1846 followed the established political practice. Party members met in county conventions to discuss local issues, to nominate candidates for county offices, and to name delegates to the State convention. At the first election, only State officials were nominated, but in each county where the party was organized there was a county committee. At the State convention the parties named the candidates for State offices and drafted a party platform. It is interesting to note that these platforms were more concerned with national principles than with local issues. And from the 1846 party platforms in Iowa, it might be surmised that the campaign was to be conducted largely upon the basis of loyalty to party.

The Whig platform asserted that it was the duty of members to use "all honorable means"

to ensure "the success of our political principles in the State of Iowa." These principles included "a sound national currency", a tariff which would afford "sufficient revenue to the national treasury and just protection to American labor", the establishment of more "perfect restraints upon executive power", the equitable distribution "of the proceeds of the sales of the public lands among all the States", a one-term presidential tenure, and public expenditures for the improvement of rivers and lakes for the promotion of better transportation and communication.

With regard to the new State of Iowa, the Whigs expressed a dislike for certain "highly illiberal" provisions of the new Constitution (meaning, of course, the anti-banking section) and claimed that it was their "imperative duty to procure its speedy amendment." And then rhapsodizing upon their position in Iowa politics, the Whigs in a poetic resolution said: "we pledge ourselves to use our utmost exertions to keep up a thorough organization of the Whig party in Iowa, and although our opponents claim, erroneously as we believe, to possess an advantage in number and depend upon ignorance, prejudice, and credulity for success; yet, having a superiority in the principles we profess, we have implicit confidence in the dawning of a brighter day, when

the clouds and darkness of locofocoism will be dispelled by the cheering rays and invigorating influence of truth and knowledge." The Whig platform concluded by endorsing the candidates who had been nominated by the convention. It was the opinion of the delegates that the candidates were "good men" and that they should be given "cordial and zealous support."

The Democratic platform was likewise formulated upon the basis of national issues. It approved James K. Polk as a party member and sanctioned the work of the current session of Congress, particularly with regard to the repeal of the "fraudulent tariff act of 1842." Furthermore, the party in Iowa favored equitable taxation and "the separation of the public moneys from the banking institutions of the country." Speaking of the Mexican War, the Democrats claimed that "the repeated unjust aggressions of the Mexican people and Mexican government, have long since called for redress."

This section was concluded by a cryptic resolution that "General Taylor and our little army have won for themselves the everlasting gratitude of the country, for which they will never, like Scott, be exposed to a shot in their rear from Washington, or any other part of the country." The Democrats concluded: "we are determined

to know nothing but Democracy; and that we will support men only for their principles. Our motto will be, less legislation, few laws, strict obedience, short sessions, light taxes, and no State debt."

The candidates nominated for Governor of Iowa were Ansel Briggs, Democrat, and Thomas McKnight, Whig. The nomination of both men, it appears, came as something of a surprise. Neither had been considered as the leader of his party in Territorial politics. Ansel Briggs, the Democratic selection, was forty years old at the time of his nomination. He was born and educated in Vermont and had come to Iowa by way of Ohio. He was the operator of a stagecoach line in Jackson County at the time of his nomination. Although Briggs had been a member of the House of Representatives in the Fifth Legislative Assembly and had at one time been sheriff of Jackson County, he was comparatively unknown.

The Whig paper, the Burlington *Hawkeye*, claimed that Briggs owed his nomination to the fact that the Mississippi steamboat, *Governor Briggs*, arrived at Bellevue just as the delegates were leaving for the convention. This suggested Briggs as a candidate, though the steamer had been named after a Whig Governor of Massachusetts. It has also been claimed that Briggs owed his nomination to Philip B. Bradley, a resi-

dent of Jackson County. Bradley was known to have been active in the Democratic Party and during the administration of the first Governor of Iowa he was his chief adviser. Another explanation for the nomination of Briggs was that a Jackson County man was chosen because of the "good showing" made by Jackson County in the ratifying election.

On the first ballot of their convention, the Whigs nominated Thomas McKnight, forty-seven years of age. He was a Virginian and had come to Iowa by way of St. Louis and the Territory of Wisconsin. Besides participating in a none-too-lucrative business enterprise, McKnight had held several political positions. In 1834 he had been named Chief Justice of the Court of Dubuque County and in 1836 he was a member of the Council from Dubuque County in the Wisconsin Territorial Legislative Assembly.

From 1840 to 1845, McKnight was Receiver of the United States Land Office in Dubuque. At the time of his appointment to this post, there was some question as to his party affiliation. In the ranks of the Democrats there were rumors that McKnight was a Whig. George Wallace Jones on several occasions asked McKnight for some evidence that he could use to show that the Iowan had a "change of sentiment" from the days of his

"opposition to General Jackson". Because of this it seems likely that the influence of both Jones and Henry Dodge had secured the receivership appointment for McKnight as a Democrat.

By 1842 it is certain that McKnight had become a confirmed Whig because he retained his position as Receiver even though there had been a change of political party in national politics. It was, therefore, the election of James K. Polk which forced McKnight out of office. Thus, although he could not be considered the leading Whig of the State of Iowa, he did have a background which could justify his selection for the gubernatorial position.

The campaign of 1846 was a short one. Only a month elapsed between the State political conventions and the general election. For the most part, the electors were expected to vote the straight party ticket, but suggested amendments to the Constitution received considerable notice and the temperance question was discussed. In a few counties the Abolitionists were beginning to be heard from — in the election itself, for example, T. B. Clark, the Abolitionist candidate for the General Assembly, polled twenty votes in Johnson County.

Other than the campaign for Governor, few personalities were debated. The Whigs maintained

that Briggs was a "nobody" and a "dark horse" candidate. But the most sensational charges were made by the Democrats against McKnight. It was charged that the former Receiver of the Land Office had not accounted for all of the monies due the government and the city of Dubuque and the Locofoco papers referred to the Whig candidate as a "defaulter". McKnight had, in fact, received several requests from Washington for certain funds which, it was claimed, had not been accounted for. However, at the final audit there was a mere thirty-eight dollars in question. This McKnight insisted was an error in the calculations.

A few days before the election McKnight published a statement concerning his candidacy. He made no mention of the Democratic charges but summarized his past political experience and reiterated some of the principles of the Whig Party. He concluded by pointing out his devotion to free institutions: "In regard to our own State Government, may we not be permitted to hope, that availing ourselves of the experience of others, we may be able to avoid many of the evils which have preyed and are preying upon the prosperity of other States, by adhering to a strict economy in our State affairs, and shunning a public debt." McKnight also expressed his regret that his

health had prevented his conducting a more active campaign.

The hopes of the Whigs rose during the days of the campaign when it was rumored that Robert Lucas, the first Governor of the Territory of Iowa and the titular head of the Democratic Party in Iowa, might become an independent candidate. If the rumors proved to be true, the Whigs were confident that Lucas would draw enough votes from Briggs to guarantee the election of McKnight. Nothing came of this rumor, however, although Lucas was deeply disappointed because he had not received the Democratic nomination for Governor. Partly because of his advancing years and partly because he had made many political enemies both within and without his party through the formative years of Iowa politics, the old Governor did not get a single vote in the convention. Ironically, Ansel Briggs had arrived in Iowa with a letter of introduction written by the Governor of Ohio to Robert Lucas.

The voting was light and the election contest was close, but when the ballots were finally counted, the Democrats had elected their entire State ticket. It is interesting to note that because of the closeness of the contest Ansel Briggs received formal notification of his election only four days before the meeting of the General Assembly.

The following tabulation of results indicates the degree to which the citizens of Iowa voted a "straight ticket". Names of Democrats are in *italics*.

Governor

<i>Ansel Briggs</i>	6689
Thomas McKnight	6528

Representative to Congress

<i>S. Leffler</i>	6830
<i>S. C. Hastings</i>	6744
J. H. Hedrick	6425
G. C. R. Mitchell	6379

Secretary of State

<i>E. Cutler</i>	6714
J. H. Cowles	6418

Auditor

<i>J. T. Fales</i>	6744
Eastin Morris	6394

Treasurer

<i>Morgan Reno</i>	6819
E. T. Smith	6365

The election of the State legislators also indicated the closeness of the contest. Although the Democrats gained twelve out of nineteen seats in the Senate, the Whigs elected twenty Representatives to nineteen for the Democrats. The campaign for the legislative seats was, if possible,

more bitter than for other offices because it was the duty of the General Assembly to choose the United States Senators from Iowa and the Justices of the State Supreme Court.

The situation was complicated by the fact that one Lee County slate of candidates had campaigned as Independents, most likely at the suggestion of the Whigs. This coalition ticket, including three Whigs and two Democrats campaigning for seats in the House of Representatives, and one Whig and one Democrat as candidates for the two Senate seats, had defeated the regular Democratic slate by a large majority. Naturally, the loyalty of all three of the coalition Democrats to the party was open to some question. It was no surprise, therefore, that these so-called Democrats often voted with the Whigs. The editor of the *Iowa Standard* at Iowa City referred to these legislators as members of the "Possum" Party.

The turnout on election day indicated that the people of Iowa did not take the first campaign too seriously. It was obvious that the Whigs were disappointed by the failure of some of their party to vote on election day. And what was even worse, some of the Whigs voted for Democrats. On this aspect of party responsibility, the *Iowa Standard*, on November 11, 1846, com-

mented: "We are not strenuous about party organization, but when such a policy has been determined upon, by common consent, the party must be supported in some other manner than by voting for our adversaries." The election, however, was over and the Democrats had won the first battle of ballots.

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