

Exhibit Review:

"The Genesis of Republicanism: The Birth and Growth of the Grand Old Party, 1854-1872" (The Library Company of Philadelphia, 1314 Locust Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107).

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As a fitting complement to the Republican National Convention, held in Philadelphia in the year 2000, the Library Company of Philadelphia created an exhibition entitled, "The Genesis of Republicanism: The Birth and Growth of the Grand Old Party, 1854-1872." On display from June 14 - December 1, 2000, this presentation, drawn entirely from the impressive collection of the library, charted the complex evolution of the Republican Party from its inception to the election of 1872. The exhibit of over 250 items including books, pamphlets, newspapers, periodicals, broadsides, cartoons, and prints, underscored the importance of print culture in nineteenth-century politics. Arranged chronologically from "The Crisis of the 1850s" to "Grant and the 'Grand Old Party,'" the work emphasized the transformation of the party from a coalition of reform elements into a party devoted to "business capitalism" in the Gilded Age. The objects on display are also revealing about the raucous nature of nineteenth-century politics. Through informed narrative and carefully chosen ephemera, exhibition curator Phillip Lapsansky, and consultants, Robert F. Engs, of the University of Pennsylvania, and Randall M. Miller, of St. Joseph's University, created a balanced and nuanced presentation.

Historians differ as to how the Republican party formed from the political chaos of the 1850s. As the exhibit highlights, the party coalesced from the "confusion of fusion" as a myriad of contending groups vied for national dominance and longevity. The designers intentionally avoided entangling historiography in their narrative but managed to reflect a variety of historical approaches.

The primary narrative echoes the work of Eric Foner, emphasizing a

broadly appealing platform of “free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men.” The meaning and expansion of freedom forms a core of the exhibit’s story. “Slavery was the issue, freedom the cause that led many northerners in the 1850s to seek a new political home in the Republican Party.” Redefining freedom became a leitmotif of Republican policy, aimed first at expanding economic and social freedoms for white Americans. The exhibit text treads lightly on the disputed subject of the emancipation impulse. Avoiding the controversy of Lincoln as “the Great Emancipator,” the designers cite the combined influence of Radical Republicans and military necessity as key in pressing Lincoln toward emancipation.

The expansion of freedom for black Americans is a crucial theme in the wartime and Reconstruction narrative. A number of items on display symbolize, in the words of curator Lapsansky, “the new American drama — the transformation of slave into citizen.” Nothing reveals this drama more fully than the 1863 colored lithograph “Freedom to the Slave,” appearing prominently on exhibit literature. The anonymous lithograph, which was intended to serve as a recruitment image for black soldiers, depicts the positive contributions of African-Americans to the cause of freedom. A black officer stands poised at the center, holding aloft his sword and flag, surrounded by images of black soldiers freeing bondsmen and marching into battle. To his left are icons of new opportunities — the church spire, the plow, the public school, and a black man reading a newspaper. It is a clear message of black agency in securing new freedoms (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Freedom to the Slave*, colored litho 1863

Although displaying many positive images of black citizenship, the exhibit also conveys a doleful sense of Foner’s view of Reconstruction as an “unfinished revolution.” The narrative credits “northern apathy and southern white terrorism” for the demise of Republican government in the reconstructed South, leaving the struggle for equal citizenship to another generation. But expanded

freedom for blacks was not the only “unfinished” work of the postwar period. Under the title “Freedom’s Ferment,” visitors observe the link between the antislavery movement of the 1830s and the women’s rights movement, which met such strong opposition in the postwar period. There is a touch of melancholy at the crystallization of the “Grand Old Party” as the party of “business capitalism.” The “contagion of liberty” which gave rise to the party, seems to have dissipated, leaving the work of expanding liberties undone.

The display is more than a narration of Republican Party history. It is also fascinating in how it illustrates the nature of nineteenth century politics. One prominent feature is the primacy and power of the written word. Scholars have described the culture of literacy at the foundation of Northern politics. The variety of ephemera on display reminds the viewer how political culture was disseminated in the era before television and radio. Unknowingly, visitors owe a debt of gratitude to a man named John McAllister. His connections to Philadelphia printers helped him amass a huge collection of books, pamphlets, and broadsides, which form a major part of the exhibit. Placing these items on display helps fulfill the Library Company’s mission of making their vast collection accessible to the public.

An additional feature of nineteenth century politics is the pungent nature of political contests. Each party engaged in campaigns extolling the virtues of their candidates while denigrating their opponents. The partisan press played a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of the candidates and issues. An example of this positive myth-making is the full-page portrait of President-elect Abraham Lincoln appearing in Frank Leslie’s *Illustrated Newspaper*. Surrounding the famous picture of the beardless Lincoln are vignettes depicting his virtuous frontier background — splitting rails, “cropping corn”, and the self-education, which led to his career in law and politics (Figure 2). Likewise, an engraving of



Figure 2



Figure 3

"General Grant & His Family" is an idealized image of Grant as father, soldier, and statesman. The uniformed war-hero Grant is seated on his horse, surrounded by his family, neatly arranged and calmly posed. The scene is contrived, with the loyal family dog in the foreground, and the U. S. Capitol in the background. They are both careful examples of positive image creation (Figure 3).

These depictions of virtuous candidates are only a part of the political equation. Exhibit designers incorporated a carefully balanced sample of the more unsavory attacks on political rivals.

Historians have explored how campaigns of fear and conspiracy play an important role in nineteenth century elections. The "republican thesis" of political historiography suggests that parties aggravated tensions by exaggerating the threat of opponents to individual liberty. Examples of these smear tactics and paranoid style include cartoons, speeches, joke-books and broadsides. Some of these items are charged with racial and ethnic slurs, which can be frankly offensive (See Figure 4 for depiction of a New York Irishman — "5 Points" — as an ape-like member of the Democratic Party). The exhibit's creators show both boldness and even-handedness in their presentation of such materials.



Figure 4

The success of "The Genesis of Republicanism" lies not only in its thoughtful narrative but also in its fascinating display of material culture. There are quite a few gems in the

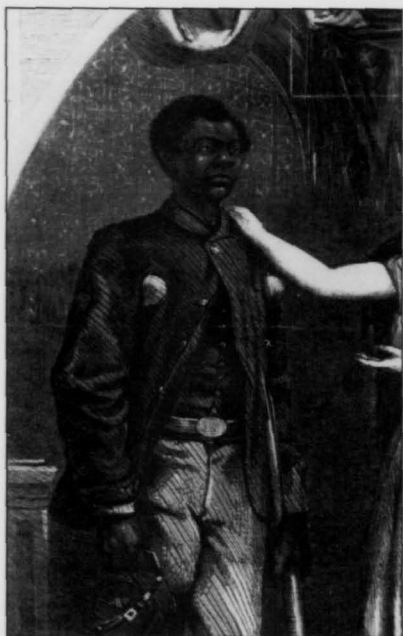


Figure 5: *A plea for the right of African-Americans to vote after the Civil War features a disabled black Union veteran*

collection, some familiar and powerful. For Lincoln aficionados, there is a striking 1895 platinum print made from an 1860 negative by Alexander Hesler. The choicest treasure is easy to pass over, a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation written in Lincoln's own hand, and purchased at the Philadelphia Sanitary Fair. One of the most engaging pieces is a large recruiting broadside printed in Philadelphia in 1863 emblazoned with the headlines "Men of Color To Arms! To Arms!" Whatever the interest or knowledge level, viewers easily find something novel and interesting in this smartly mounted exhibition. Also to be commended is the accompanying online exhibit,

available through the Library Company of Philadelphia homepage (www.librarycompany.org). It was easily navigable and contained all the primary text as well as a sample of images from the display itself.

Thanks to James Hill of the Library Company of Philadelphia for their assistance in providing these images from the Library Company's collections.