A GREAT PARTY WHICH MIGHT HAVE BEEN BORN IN PHILADELPHIA

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By ROY F. NICHOLS, Ph.D., Professor of History in the University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia was the birthplace of American politics, here the first parties were formed and the first sessions of Congress set many precedents which were to be fundamental in party technique. Even after the capitol was moved to Washington politics flourished and from time to time important developments have found Philadelphia to be their place of origin. Four times history making party conventions have held their deliberations in the city of Brotherly Love.

On Washington’s birthday, 1856, a now forgotten party just missed becoming great. At that time it was uncertain what character the group would take which was to supersede the Democratic party in control of national affairs. The American party, commonly called the “Know Nothings”, were enjoying a momentary popularity and, to many, seemed the logical group to lead in the campaign to defeat the Democrats. However, all such hope was dashed to the ground on this Washington’s birthday, when the delegates split over the issue of slavery and the party was destroyed. Five months later, in June 1856, at a second convention the Republican party successfully established a national organization and nominated its first candidate for the Presidency, John C. Frémont. In 1900 occurred the famous convention where Theodore Roosevelt was buried, so it was thought, in the Vice-Presidency, only to be resurrected shortly thereafter to achieve unusual
A fourth convention of significance and the one of our concern is the almost forgotten meeting held in August, 1866.

More than a year before, just as the Civil War had come to an end, Andrew Johnson became President upon the assassination of Lincoln. He entered office with the determination to carry out his predecessor's policy of speedy and merciful restoration of the Union. However, he failed to call Congress in special session and his assumption of reconstruction power without congressional aid roused legislative ire against him. Furthermore his policy of immediate reconstruction seemed to be reviving the political power of southern Democrats by enabling the ex-Confederates to return to Congress. Such results were endangering the Union congressional majority. Finally, the restored state governments were enacting laws regulating the conduct of the freed negroes in such a manner as to suggest a return to slavery or at least to peonage. These results of Johnson's program gave his opponents three weapons, charges of "executive usurpation", the "return of the rebels", and the "re-enslavement of the negro." When Congress met in December, 1865, there was a bitter group led by Thaddeus Stevens, Benjamin F. Wade, Charles Sumner and others of similar temperament who were furious at Johnson's so-called "presumption."

From December, 1865, to February, 1866, these "radicals" made a series of hostile moves against Johnson which led him to denounce them publicly and violently in a speech on February 22. Henceforth it was apparent that unless Johnson could secure the choice of a more friendly Congress in the elections of 1866, he was to be shorn of all political power. But to win the election he must have a political organization.

There were two political parties then active, the National Union party formed by Lincoln which had
nominated and elected him in 1864, with Johnson as his running mate, and the remnant of the Democratic party which had nominated McClellan at the same election. Should Johnson go over to the Democrats, should he organize a new party or should he gain control of the machinery of the National Union Party and secure an endorsement from it? There was division among his counsellors and no clear cut decision was ever made. Officially it seems to have been his plan to reorganize the National Union Party as an administration party, but such overtures were made to ex-Confederates and northern Democrats that the move could be and was interpreted to mean the organization of a conservative party to oppose the radical wing of the National Union party which had a two-thirds majority in each branch of Congress. This uncertainty of purpose was one of the weaknesses of the new move, and it was cleverly utilized by the radicals.

For practical purposes, however, Johnson's administration wanted to mobilize as much support as possible from any source to defeat its enemies. The first step was taken by the first assistant-postmaster-general Alexander W. Randall and some moderate congressmen who organized a National Union Club, at Washington in March 1866. This club adopted a platform supporting Johnson and sent a circular into all parts of the Union to friendly politicians and office holders calling for the organization of similar clubs to mobilize support for the President. This move had the active backing of William H. Seward and his New York organization led by Thurlow Weed, of Senators Edgar Cowan of Pennsylvania and James R. Doolittle of Wisconsin, of Orville H. Browning, ex-senator from Illinois, of Gideon Welles, secretary of the navy, and Hugh McCulloch, secretary of the treasury. At the same time that these clubs were in the process of organization, Johnson turned to using the patronage and
began removing postmasters and customs officials. But more must be done.

Congress in April, 1866, overrode the President's veto of the Civil Rights Bill and produced the Fourteenth Amendment aimed to prevent reconstruction of the rebel states until they had accepted the bitter pill of negro suffrage, an idea repulsive to Johnson. To effect this final destruction of state sovereignty, it became apparent that some spectacular counter stroke was necessary. The moderate Union men who had been active in organizing the local clubs became sponsors for the idea of a great mass convention made up of delegates from south as well as north. These delegates were to reorganize Lincoln's Union party upon a really national basis and endorse Johnson's reconstruction policy. Seward and Weed persuaded Congressman Henry J. Raymond, editor of the *New York Times* and chairman of the Union party national committee, to give his assent and to pave the way for the announcement of the idea by a speech in Congress and editorials in the *Times*.

President Johnson announced to a small gathering of the prime movers in the National Union Club idea held at the White House on June 11 that he was willing to back the move to the extent of his available private means, $20,000. Several people including such hostile personalities as Seward and Montgomery Blair made experimental drafts of the sort of statement which should be issued to the public and at length it was decided to have Senator Doolittle prepare a call to be issued by the National Union Club with the endorsement of some Democratic congressmen and senators. After much debate among the promoters at a series of White House conferences the call was issued on June 25 and early in July an executive committee was appointed of both Democrats and Union party men who issued a supplementary invitation to Democrats. It was
hoped that four Union men and four Democrats would be chosen from each state and territory as delegates-at-large and that two from each party would be sent from each congressional district. The great point stressed was the fact that each of the thirty-six states was to be represented. Was this a plan for a new party or not? That issue was never to be definitely settled.

Philadelphia was to be the place of meeting and August 14, 1866, the date. The gathering was to be the first political reunion since the war and was to attract much attention. Much preparation was necessary for the thousands of people who it was hoped would be interested. Philadelphia opinion in general was doubtful about the honor of having so many southerners as visitors but there was a small group who set about with a will to promote the success of the new move.

The leader in the "support Johnson" move in Pennsylvania was United States Senator Edgar Cowan of Greensburg. He had been elected to the Senate in 1861 by the Republicans but he had played a lone hand during his term and had refused to affiliate closely with the Cameron-Curtin-Stevens radicals who controlled the state Union party. His term was about to expire and several times his party in convention and in the legislature had sought his resignation. Twice in the spring of 1866 such demand was made and it was evident that his only small chance of political survival was in the new move. Two other figures bore the brunt of the local organizing. One of these was a man who had achieved much prominence before the Civil War, William F. Johnston of Pittsburgh, last Whig governor of Pennsylvania. President Johnson chose him to be collector of the port of Philadelphia in July, 1866, and removed Col. Wm. B. Thomas, radical, to give him place. The other was Joseph R. Flanigen, editor of the Philadelphia Daily News. The latter had begun the active support of Johnson in his editorial columns on
March 26 and had been busy organizing the state and the city. Various local National Union Johnson Clubs were organized and a state convention planned at preliminary meetings in Philadelphia early in May. The official inauguration of the movement took place May 19 at the Academy of Music with a formal organization of the National Union Johnson Club of Philadelphia. Flanigen had secured the cooperation of Senators Doolittle and Cowan as well as Norton of Minnesota. Here Henry Simons was introduced as president of the club and the three senators gave vigorous expression of the need to support the President, restore the south and return to normalcy.

This move was followed on July 3 by a state convention of the National Union Party which was but sparsely attended by seventy-five delegates from various parts of the state. They were none of them very prominent and were largely shepherded by Johnston and Flanigen. They chose delegates for the new convention headed by these two leaders and Senator Cowan. Three weeks later the Democratic state committee chose a similar delegation and to lead it resurrected three pre-war governors, David R. Porter, Asa Packer and William Bigler. Surely this convention was to have executive talent. However no influential politician was in line, the mighty were all with the radicals.

In the hope of building up enthusiasm a number of clubs were organized throughout the state under the auspices of the National Union state central committee headed by Flanigen. But meanwhile local preparations had to be attended to and provision made for a meeting place. Not even the Academy of Music was large enough to hold the thousands who were expected, so the state central committee in cooperation with the Philadelphia Johnson Club decided to build a wigwam like that erected in Chicago for the nomination of Lincoln. On July 20 they at length appointed a sub-commit-

This committee started to work with zeal and let the contract to Jacob Colladay who began work on July 26 to prepare a building that would seat 10,000 people, designed by George S. Bethell, to be ready by August 14. Mr. Colladay seemingly had great confidence in his abilities at quick construction. The first site chosen was on the corner of Broad and Wallace Streets where a skating rink was located during the winter and the various storekeepers and saloon keepers in the vicinity rejoiced. Unfortunately, the committee in choosing this site, had failed to reckon with the owner. A local ball team was using this space for its games and had undertaken to grant permission to the committee to build the wigwam upon it. They had neglected the minor detail, however, of consulting the owner and Dr. Jansen, when he heard of it, refused to permit the work to go on. Time was growing short and the committee quickly turned to what seemingly was a goat pasture on the south side of Girard Avenue, between 20th Street and College Avenue. Here on the first of August began a hurried fortnight’s construction which produced what was claimed to be the largest building ever erected in Philadelphia except the Sanitary Fair building and where the largest audience which ever gathered in the Academy of Music could be seated in one wing of the gallery.

Just as construction was being undertaken, the telegraph flashed the word throughout the nation that a sanguinary riot had taken place in New Orleans in which unreconstructed southern rebels had mowed down innocent negroes. Feeling rose high and as it was anticipated that many hundreds of southerners were coming to this convention, authorities were beset with fears that their presence might precipitate street riots
and cause destruction of life and property. Local opinion was hostile and threats were made that the wigwam would be burned before it could be used. Extraordinary precautions were therefore taken, somewhat exaggerated by the radicals, we may suspect, in order to discredit the organization that was to be attempted. The managers of the convention secured the services of Mr. F. McCloskey who had been prominent as sergeant-at-arms in national conventions for the last twelve years, and brought him from New York to superintend the work of keeping order. Chief Ruggles of the Philadelphia Police Force mobilized his officers and the mayor called out the local militia. Colonel Thomas, who had just been dismissed as collector of the port of Philadelphia by President Johnson, mobilized his regiment of militia holding them in readiness by means of three roll calls a day for any service that might be necessary because of street disturbances. Captain Robert M. Evans stationed his Independent Scouts at Girard College and the marines at the Navy Yard were held in readiness for a quick summons. As these war-like preparations were being made, the noise of carpenters feverishly hammering to complete this mammoth construction resounded throughout the neighborhood.

Just how this big building was financed is not clear but we may suspect that some part of the money at least was obtained by the granting of concessions. One hopeful individual paid $1250. for the privilege of selling steaks and liquors within the building itself. Around it were erected booths where all sorts of refreshments might be had from ginger pop and hemlock beer at 10c for a bottle-green glassful to old Otard brandy at 30c a thimbleful. The dwelling houses across the street from the wigwam were rented and furnished with chairs and tables where those who wished to drink sitting down might be refreshed. As one reporter...
phrased it, "As everyone knows, this is not a religious convention". So vigorously were the possibilities of liquor selling promoted that on the day before the convention, a temperance lecturer arrived on the scene and held forth eloquently to such as would hear him upon the evils of intemperance. District Attorney Mann was also perturbed by the seeming deluge and went before Judge Pierce the day preceding the convention to get leave to send up indictments to the court; thereupon he gave evidence to the Grand Jury which caused them to present several for the offense of illegal liquor disposition. In spite of the District Attorney's efforts, however, the sale continued although one reporter stated that, viewed in the light of the effects the liquor must have been villainous.

Railroads had given special rates, some of the southern roads going so far as to give return tickets for one-way fares. The hotels were all preparing for an enormous business. It was expected that several thousand people would congregate and there must be a place for them to sleep. The Continental Hotel was to be headquarters and the rush of business was to be shared by the La Pierre House, the Girard House and the other hostelries in the town. The La Pierre House imported 300 cots which were arranged in its public rooms as in a dormitory and like extra preparations were made by the Continental. Woe betide the latecomer for he found the hotels full. The last group of importance to make preparations for this great harvest were the pickpockets who, the press said, gathered in large numbers for the purpose of applying their nefarious trade. One Georgia delegate loaned a friendly stranger $900, while he went to cash a check and never saw the new found friend or his money again.

Delegates soon followed the committee in arriving and as early as the Friday preceding those from parts of the lower south appeared. Most of the prominent
delegates were entertained in private homes but the great number thronged the hotels. The local committee was busy hurrying the carpenters who worked all day and most of the night, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, to push the hall toward completion. The Pennsylvania Johnson State Central committee kept open house at their headquarters in the St. Lawrence Hotel and the Democrats at 828 Walnut Street. Press representatives flocked thither from all parts of the country eager to get first hand information as to the workability of speedy reunion; accommodations were provided for 125 reporters. As they came in the delegates and the reporters registered at the Continental, the former in the room used by the Japanese embassy on their historic visit to Philadelphia just before the war.

By Sunday afternoon most of the delegates except those from New England had arrived and a general gathering was held in the rotunda of the Continental. Of chief interest were the South Carolina delegates, led by James L. Orr and B. F. Perry. Alabama had sent George S. Houston, Governor George E. Parsons and John Forsyth to head her delegation. H. V. Johnson and General J. B. Gordon were the best known from Georgia and Alexander H. Stephens*, late Vice-President of the Confederacy, was expected. William A. Graham of North Carolina, A. O. P. Nicholson of Tennessee, Garrett Davis and R. H. Stanton of Kentucky were other prominent pre-war figures from Dixie. From the west came Senator Thomas A. Hendricks of Indiana, ex-Senator Charles E. Stuart of Michigan, John A. McClemand from Illinois, Augustus Caesar Dodge from Iowa, Hugh Ewing of Kansas and, perish the thought, Clement L. Vallandigham, arch-copperhead from Ohio. New England’s delegates when they finally arrived contained no one of note but from New

* Stephens finally arrived on Wednesday, but was too ill to appear in public.
York came John A. Dix, Henry J. Raymond and Samuel J. Tilden. Thurlow Weed, not a delegate, lurked in the background, while from Gotham came another marplot, Fernando Wood, ex-mayor and secessionist. Such a delegation was more remarkable for Democrats than for Union party men altho the numbers of each were equal. The great question raised by the personnel was the presence of Vallandigham and Wood.

Both of these men had been so notoriously obnoxious in the north that their connection with this hoped-for new appeal would be too great a burden to be borne. But they were regularly accredited delegates and according to the broad terms of the call were welcome. On every hand as the delegates talked together there were threatening remarks. If Wood and Vallandigham attempted to sit with the convention they would be thrown out, or at least there would be angry debate and a permanent dissipation of harmony. What was to be done? The men themselves of course felt the atmosphere of hostility and Wood took early occasion to withdraw gracefully by means of a letter which was immediately published. Vallandigham was more stubborn, he had to be reasoned with and implored, before he at length ungraciously withdrew. With these stormy petrels out of the way, a general sigh of relief was breathed, especially on the part of the managers.

Monday proved to be a rainy day so a rather bedraggled group was all that witnessed the raising of the flag on the hundred foot flagpole of the wigwam. More enthusiastic was the five o’clock meeting of the chairmen of the state delegations, including Senator Cowan for Pennsylvania. Randall called this group to order in Parlor C of the Continental and the temporary officers and committees were arranged for; General John A. Dix was chosen temporary president and fair weather and a completed convention hall were fervently hoped for. In the evening the Democrats staged
a large mass meeting at the National Guard Hall on Race Street below Sixth. They rejoiced at this gathering as an opportunity of boosting the candidacy of their nominee for governor, Hiester Clymer. He was having an almost hopeless fight against the popular General John W. Geary and needed any prestige he might gather. All day long omnibuses had been going about the streets filled with musicians and carrying great signs calling all to attend the rally. The big feature of this meeting was a speech by Orr; a South Carolinian was actually speaking in Philadelphia. He was eloquent and fraternal, Union was the great need, the war was over. That night there was no quiet in the hotels.

Tuesday morning was dark and threatening and the news was abroad that the wigwam was not finished, much debate ensued as to whether the convention would not have to meet elsewhere. But rain or no rain it was to be at the wigwam and thither about noon the delegates began to wend their way. The three street car lines that went out to Girard College put on no extra cars and the congestion was terrific and profitable for pickpockets. Hacks helped but they were expensive so the gathering was slow in assembling. The roof was but half on and clouds were ominous so, with many an apprehensive glance skyward, the delegates took their places. Not until 12.30 was Randall able to mount the platform under the great banner inscribed “1776–1866; The Union and the Constitution.” He roared in his heavy voice “‘Gentlemen of the Convention; I have to announce to you the approach of the delegates from Massachusetts and South Carolina, arm-in-arm.’” Immediately there was a sensation. At the rear of the room there entered a long procession and, wonder of wonders, it really was headed by a delegate from South Carolina and a delegate from Massachusetts arms locked in friendly fashion. They were followed by
the great mass of the delegates proceeding in like fraternal order and from this ceremony the convention received its name, the "Arm in Arm Convention". The band blared forth "Rally round the Flag, Boys" and a leather lunged delegate from Missouri roared for three cheers for the thirty-six states. Then the band played the "Star Spangled Banner" and another stentorian voice demanded three cheers for the Union; this time the call came from an ex-confederate General Dick Taylor. The climax of the enthusiasm, however, broke when the band played "Dixie" and General Custer of the long blond hair threw his hat into the air and shouted "three cheers". In the midst of this enthusiasm, General John A. Dix, war Democrat, was chosen temporary chairman of the convention and, taking the chair, delivered a speech calling for the speedy restoration of the thirty-six states and support of the President. Committees on permanent organization were then appointed and the convention adjourned just as the clouds deposited a tremendous shower. The street car service was still hopeless and it was a bedraggled convention that got back to its hotels, where, fearing colds, they immediately hastened to the bar room for the medicine of the day.

On Wednesday, the second meeting was held at 1 P. M. with the hammering of the carpenters still a noisy accompaniment to the proceedings. Senator James R. Doolittle, moderate Republican, was chosen permanent chairman, and he, like Dix, delivered a message of harmony. After his effort, the committee on resolutions was appointed and a message read from President Johnson expressing his confidence in the success of the proceedings. As the convention adjourned at 2:15 it was evident that there was something wrong. Two days had passed and there had been but two speeches. It was evident that the proceedings would only last another day and that in all probability
there would be but one speech more. But, here were literally hundreds of delegates who had come from all parts of the country for the purpose of expressing themselves and they were to have no opportunity. There were some murmurings and a gifted cartoonist drew a picture of the delegates marching around with padlocks on their lips, so careful were the managers of the convention that no opportunity be allowed for a debate which might turn acrimonious. However, there was to be recompense. The old National Band had been practising and it now appeared before the Hotel Continental. Here it played while a crowd gathered and called for the delegates. From three o'clock in the afternoon until 11 at night, there was continuous flow of oratory from the balcony of the Continental. The delegates were having their chance and love of union and hope of future greatness were themes which were played in mighty strain. To be sure, quite frequently the crowd around was just as enthusiastic as the speaker and joined in the general heckling which however did not discourage the participants. After hours of this the band went on to other hotels and all over the town; that night there sounded the favorite air of the day, "Who's been here since I've been gone." During all this enthusiasm the committee on resolutions labored far into the night and finally accepted Henry J. Raymond's series to be presented the next day.

In spite of this tremendous exuberance the convention was able to reassemble at 10 o'clock next morning for the final session. At this time resolutions were presented pledging support to the President's policy of speedy reconstruction and calling upon the nation to elect a Congress favorable to such a program whereupon the proceedings were finally concluded by a speech from Henry J. Raymond, who eloquently pleaded for support for the President's policy and the restoration of the conquered states. The usual resolutions of
thanks were enthusiastically adopted and the convention adjourned to the tune of "Home Sweet Home". There followed a rush for the trains.

This convention was in many respects a great disappointment to the people of Philadelphia, largely because so many of the delegates were impecunious and failed to spend the money which had been anticipated. The managers of the wigwam themselves were immediately in difficulties because it appeared that they had violated a city ordinance regulating the construction of wooden buildings and were served notice that they must pay a fine of $75. for their carelessness and furthermore if the building were not removed within thirty days, there would be an additional penalty of $50. On the 17th of August, therefore, a sign informed the inquisitive public that building material was for sale and shortly the giant wigwam disappeared.

Throughout the country the supporters of the move considered the convention a success but unfortunately, its doctrines of harmony and speedy reconstruction were all too advanced for the popular mind jaded by war psychology. Radical politicians easily persuaded the populace that the north must still have its pound of flesh. Then too, President Johnson made the mistake of going on an extended speaking tour in which he expressed himself violently and without dignity in such fashion as to arouse popular prejudice. Consequently, the election went overwhelmingly against him.

Had this convention succeeded in organizing a favorable popular opinion, the Union party rather than the Republican party would have been the great organization of the succeeding years. The south would have been speedily reconstructed and would have returned to its accustomed place in the political councils of the nation. It would not have been an isolated and downtrodden section and the word "solid" in a political sense would not have been prefixed to it. But that was
not to be. Today the inquisitive antiquarian who goes to Twentieth Street and Girard Avenue will find no bronze tablet "marking the spot" where a great party was born.

NOTES ON THE SOURCES

Light on the preliminary steps leading to the calling of this convention is found in the papers of Andrew Johnson, Edwin M. Stanton, Thomas Ewing and Gideon Welles in the manuscript division of the Library of Congress, in the Diary of Gideon Welles (Boston, 1911), in the Diary of Orville H. Browning (Springfield, Illinois, 1925–1933), and in "Extracts from the Journal of Henry J. Raymond" in Scribners Monthly, XX. (1880), 275–280.


The general situation is described in Howard K. Beale, The Critical Year (New York, 1930), George Fort Milton, The Age of Hate (New York, 1930) and Ellis P. Oberholtzer, History of the United States since the Civil War, I. (New York, 1917). The author has been aided in this research by a grant from the Special Research Committee of the University of Pennsylvania.