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THE REPUBLICAN PARTY ORIGINATED IN PITTSBURGH

By

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That the Republican party, as a national organization, was formed in Pittsburgh is undisputable. It is, however, known to few, even in Pittsburgh, that the Republican party itself was conceived in this city. There has been considerable controversy as to where and when the Republican party as a local organization had its birth. It is generally believed that the party came into existence shortly after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill on May 30, 1854, and Ripon, Wisconsin claims the honor of organizing a party under the name Republican soon after that date. The people of Jackson, Michigan, maintain that at the state convention which they held on July 6, 1854, this name was first used to designate the party organized to prevent the extension of slavery. A number of other widely separated communities present the same claim. All these assumptions are clearly erroneous, and to Pittsburgh must be given the credit of being the place where the Republican party originated, having been organized there under that name in 1852. The writer

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of this article frankly confesses that he was not aware of this important fact until it was called to his attention by William McConway, a valued member of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, after the appearance in the October, 1920, number of this magazine of the story of, "Abraham Lincoln in Pittsburgh, and the Birth of the Republican Party."

The founding of the Republican party in Pittsburgh was the result of the Presidential election of 1852. The so-called compromise measures which bear the name of Henry Clay, which were enacted in 1850, were claimed to settle the existing differences between those in favor of slavery and those opposed to it. Under these laws California was admitted as a free state; and the laws provided governments for the remaining territory acquired from Mexico, giving to those governments legislative power over "all rightful subjects of legislation consistent with the constitution of the United States", and the provisions of the act creating them. The slave trade was prohibited in the District of Columbia, and a new fugitive slave law was enacted which provided officers of the United States for its execution.

The two predominant parties, the Whig and Democratic parties accepted the compromise as final. The Whig national convention of 1852 declared that it was a "settlement in principle and substance of the dangerous and exciting questions which they embrace," and deprecated all further agitation of the question of slavery as "dangerous to our peace"; and the convention nominated General Winfield Scott as its candidate for President. The Democrats declared their purpose to "abide by, and adhere to a faithful execution of the acts known as the Compromise measures settled by the last Congress." Their candidate for President was General Franklin Pierce. But all over the North there were men who would not agree that the question of the extension of slavery had been settled. They met in national convention in Masonic Hall, Pittsburgh, on August 11, 1852, under the name of the "Free Soil Democrats," and nominated John P. Hale for President. In 1848 they had demanded the prohibition of the extension of slavery into free territory, now their platform declared "slavery to be a

sin against God, and a crime against man, which no human enactment nor usage can make right"; and "that Christianity, humanity, and patriotism alike demand its abolition," and it called for the "immediate repeal of the fugitive slave law". The slave power mistrusted the Whig party, notwithstanding the declarations in its platform, and went to its old and tried friend, the Democratic party, and Scott was overwhelmingly defeated and Pierce elected. The Free Soil Democracy met with a defeat still more ignominious than that of the Whigs. It had shown less strength than in 1848, its extreme radicalism on the question of slavery having lost it many supporters, who while sincerely opposed to the extension of slavery, had not yet advanced to the stage where they believed in its abolition, and the vote of the party shrank from 291,000 in 1848 to 156,000 in 1852. The Anti-Masonic party had dwindled into insignificance, and the strength of the remaining political parties was so trifling from a national point of view that they were hardly worth considering. The result of the election was to place the Democrats in absolute control of the national government. They had the President and a large majority of both houses of Congress. The party was completely dominated by the pro-slavery element.

The Whigs of Allegheny County were stunned. The county had given Scott 9615 votes, to 7226 cast for Pierce. They could attribute the repudiation of their candidate by the country at large to only one cause, namely the defection of the Southern Whigs, because of their fear that Scott's success would mean loss of prestige to the cause of slavery; and the party was torn into fragments. The Democratic *Daily Pittsburgh Post* referred to it as "the late Whig party." (1) The views of the Whigs on public questions were now widely at variance and there was no way of bringing about harmony. There were, however, men of vision in Pittsburgh who realizing that the Whig party was dead, decided that nothing remained but to organize an entirely new party; and this was done within a few weeks after the Presidential election.

On July 6, 1904, the Republicans of Jackson, Michigan, celebrated, what they termed the semi-centennial of the organization of the Republican party. Col. John Hay, the Secretary of State, was the principal orator, and the news-

papers all over the country contained accounts of the event. The news of the celebration awakened old memories in David C. Herbst, a prominent business man of Pittsburgh, a member of the well known oil refining firm of Warden and Oxnard, and caused him to dispute the claim of Jackson to being the place where the Republican party originated. In a communication to the *Pittsburgh Gazette* published in its issue of July 25, 1904, he shows that Pittsburgh is entitled to this honor, and that the party was organized and named in the grocery store conducted by him when quite a young man, in the three-story brick house which stood at the northwesterly corner of Third Street, now Third Avenue and Cherry Alley, the ground being at present covered by a portion of the two-story brick annex to the United States Government building. In 1852 the premises were owned by Alexander Miller, and were in 1877 conveyed by his descendants to the United States. At the celebration of the "Golden Jubilee of the Republican Party" in Philadelphia on June 17, 18 and 19, 1906, Mr. Herbst made an address (2) in which he repeated his account of the origin of the Republican party and elaborated some of the details related in his letter to the *Pittsburgh Gazette*.

Mr. Herbst's grocery store was located in the Second Ward, for several generations known as the South Ward. It comprised the territory between Diamond Alley now Diamond Street, and the Monongahela River, and Wood and Try streets. It was the only ward in the city, where according to Mr. Herbst, "the citizens took an active part in politics outside of the days of election." And with the exception of three persons who either lived in the adjoining First Ward, or had their places of business there, the men who inaugurated the movement for the organization of the new party were all residents of the Second Ward.

Mr. Herbst's store was the social center of the district, where the leading men of the vicinity gathered after the cares of business had been laid aside. But on a certain winter night in 1852, shortly before the midwinter holidays, when the power which the pro-slavery Democracy had acquired in the Presidential election was fully realized, they came together for something other than social enjoyment. They met in deadly earnest determined to carry out the

design which the passing events was developing in their minds. The room was small, the building itself measuring only about twenty seven feet square, and for lack of space and better accommodations, the men sat upon nail kegs, boxes, flour barrels, the counters, or clustered around the warm stove. All shades of political opinion were represented. There were Whigs, Democrats, Abolitionists, Free Soilers, Washingtonians. Among them were a number who were active in politics. Their object was to formulate a basis for a new political party upon which all the factions opposed to the pro-slavery Democracy might unite for the accomplishment of its overthrow.

The persons who were associated with Mr. Herbst in the conference were far-sighted and full of resolution, and had either succeeded, or were succeeding in the various pursuits in which they were engaged. William J. Howard was United States pension agent, whom the Whigs and Anti-Masons had elected mayor of the city in 1845, and who was defeated for that office when again a candidate in 1846. Robert Rodgers was a member of the firm of Howard and Rodgers, coppersmiths and sheet iron workers, and Rees C. Fleeson was one of the editors and proprietors of the *Pittsburgh Daily Dispatch*, his partner, Col. J. Heron Foster, being at the time the Free Soil candidate for mayor. John J. Roggen was one of the proprietors of the Pittsburgh Novelty Works, manufacturers of hardware, and in politics was styled the "self-made mechanic"; he had been the Whig candidate for mayor the year before. James Dunlop was an attorney, and the author of a digest of the laws of Pennsylvania which had already run through two editions and was to be republished in future years. Charles Naylor was also an attorney, who originally hailed from Philadelphia where he was admitted to the bar in 1828, and had been a member of Congress from 1837 to 1841. He had commanded a company of volunteers in the Mexican War, known as the Philadelphia Rangers. Coming to Pittsburgh after the close of the war, he had been admitted to the bar of Allegheny County on May 4, 1849, on motion of James Dunlop. Another attorney was Gilbert L. B. Fetterman. Jacob W. Cook was a broker, and George Wilson of a tobacconist. James W. Baxter was one of the

owners of a spice mill. John McD. Crossan was proprietor of the Monongahela House. Minas Tindle was a partner in the firm of Tindle and Company, who conducted a furniture store; David N. White was proprietor and editor of the *Pittsburgh Daily Gazette*; Reuben Miller, Jr., was engaged in various enterprises, being at once a wholesale grocer, an iron founder and a steamboat owner; and William C. Robinson was of Robinson and Minis, founders and engine builders. John McCurdy was an associate of James Park, Jr., in the business of dealing in tin plate and queensware; and Richard F. Smyth was a partner in Kay and Company, booksellers and stationers. James W. Woodwell was a furniture manufacturer. Robert M. Riddle was editor of the *Pittsburgh Commercial Journal*, who early the next year was to be elected mayor by the Whigs and Anti-Masons, and had just been nominated by the Whig convention as its candidate for that office. His candidacy was already being enlivened by the rhyming comments of the *Daily Pittsburgh Post*:

“Sing hey diddle, diddle!
Hurrah for Bob Riddle!
The man for the workingmen he!
He smiles in their faces
With all his best graces
As friendly as friendly can be
But when fortunes frown
And the *wages come down*
And labor is trodden in dust,
The proud ‘upper ten’
Claim the *Journal* man then
And ever he’s true to the trust.”

Subsequent meetings were held in the little grocery store and others participated and aided in the movement, as soon as the purpose became known, notably Thomas Steel, the alderman of the Second Ward. Nor did the cold blasts and heavy snows of that severe winter deter the lovers of right from attending the conferences, or chill their ardor. The conglomeration of political opinions caused many sharp debates; oftentimes a dissolution was threatened. The representatives of each particular party desired something which

would be recognized as peculiar to his organization. The Abolitionists wanted some direct reference to the abolition of slavery; the Free Soilers asked support for the Free Soil idea. Fleeson was willing to forego his opinions for the sake of harmony; Steel asserted that unless something was said in favor of the Washingtonians he would with 'raw.

The selection of a name presented an almost insurmountable obstacle and threatened to break up the gatherings a number of times, and one night it became necessary to lock the doors, in order that the meeting might be kept together; and that night a decision was reached. The debate had been particularly acrimonious, when Captain Naylor rose in a quiet way, and with a smile and a wave of his hand, commanded, "Peace!"

A hush fell on those in attendance, and after a moment's hesitation, Naylor continued quoting:

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet."

He proceeded, urging the necessity of concluding the work for which they had met, and added, "Our country is a great Republic; why not name the new party 'Republican', without prefix or suffix?"

Captain Naylor had struck a popular chord; an agreement was reached, every one was satisfied, the name was adopted and the first step in a great work was accomplished; and this was the conception of the new party.

And the gatherings in Mr. Herbst's grocery store grew constantly in numbers; and the name Republican became known outside of the little group who originated it; and while the disintegration of the Whig party as a national organization went on, men began calling themselves Republicans, and the flag of Republicanism was carried into other counties of Pennsylvania. When the Kansas-Nebraska bill was enacted into a law, the Republicans became an army. Nor did the sudden rise of the Know Nothing party deter these men in their efforts for concentrated action. Then in 1855, David N. White sent out his calls to the Republicans, (4) asking them to meet and organize the scattered units into fighting forces, not only in Allegheny County, but in the state of Pennsylvania as well. The National Convention of February 22, 1856, followed, and the Republican party of the United States was launched. That the party

was also born in other places is beyond question, and Ripon and Jackson and the other places are no doubt entitled to share in this honor, but as the Pittsburgh meetings antedated all the others, in the words of Mr. Herbst "The parentage is certainly in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania" (5).

There may be certain individuals who doubt that the Republican party originated in Pittsburgh in 1852, claiming that after the lapse of more than half a century Mr. Herbst's memory may have been at fault, and that the meetings in his grocery store were held at a later date. To these persons it can only be said that a careful investigation of many of the statements made by Mr. Herbst in this matter, shows that he was correct in every particular. He gives the names of the men at the conferences even to the middle initials; also the names of the concerns with which they were connected, or the pursuits in which they were engaged. He must have had written data supporting his narrative, and have prepared his *Pittsburgh Gazette* article and made his Philadelphia address, with a full knowledge of the facts.

In Pennsylvania the Native American party had its inception in December, 1843, when a meeting was held in Philadelphia at which an "American Republican Association", as the units of the Native American party were called, was organized. Other associations soon sprang up in almost every ward, and township in Philadelphia. Captain Naylor who suggested the name for the party organized in Mr. Herbst's grocery store, had gained great popularity in Philadelphia during the Native American riots in that city, in 1844, the story of which is told at length in Scharf and Westcott's *History of Philadelphia*, (6). There had been a month of rioting; many persons were killed; several Roman Catholic churches and two convent schools were burned. On July 6th, an immense crowd had gathered about the Roman Catholic Church on Queen Street intent on securing the arms, supplied by the state, which had been taken there. The Sheriff of the county with a posse was present to preserve order. Several companies of militia with three field pieces came upon the scene. The soldiers were taunted by the crowd who dared them to fire; stones are said to have been thrown at them. General Cadwallader, the commander of the militia, gave orders to fire, and one of the field pieces

was leveled at the crowd. Captain Naylor was a member of the Sheriff's possé and hearing the order, rushed forward in front of the canon and shouted, No! Don't fire! Don't fire!

The cannon was not fired and the lives of many innocent women and children as well as men were saved. But Naylor was arrested by order of General Cadwallader and under guard was taken into the church. He was now the hero of the hour. The next day the crowd, greatly augmented, and having obtained arms and even a cannon, returned to the church, broke down the door, and compelled the soldiers quartered there to release Naylor. He was received by his liberators with the wildest demonstration of enthusiasm. From the steps of the church he made a speech, entreating the people to keep the peace and retire to their homes. He was then escorted in triumph to his residence by the multitude.

This experience had no doubt fixed the word Republican indelibly in Naylor's mind. He was an orator, and his speech in Congress against President VanBuren's plan for an Independent United States Treasury had gained him lasting fame (7). That he was highly esteemed in Pittsburgh, is apparent from the laudatory notices which appeared in both the *Pittsburgh Gazette* and the *Daily Commercial Journal* of November 15, 1852, on the occasion of his visit to Philadelphia in the early part of that month. It was therefore natural that Naylor would assume the leadership at the meeting in the grocery store, and suggest the name which had been burned in his memory by his experiences in Philadelphia. That this was in his mind is apparent when it is recalled, that he declared that the designation of the new party was to be without prefix or suffix, both a prefix and a suffix being part of the name of the American Republican Associations. It should also be remembered that the name must have been well known to the others present at the conference, as it was that of the party of Jefferson, and for the further reason that an American Republican Association had been in existence in Pittsburgh since August 5, 1844, of which George H. Thurston, a well known Pittsburgher, was secretary.

Captain Naylor was a near neighbor of Mr. Herbst, residing on Third Street directly across Cherry Alley from Mr. Herbst's grocery store, where he also had his office,

lawyers in Pittsburgh then having their offices in their dwellings. In his *Pittsburgh Gazette* article Mr. Herbst relates interesting details regarding Captain Naylor and the company which he took into the Mexican War.

"The company was known as the 'Killers and Bouncers' and was composed of the roughest element of the Quaker City. It was this element that during the Native American riots in Philadelphia set fire to and burned the Roman Catholic churches and convents. The people of Philadelphia equipped them and sent them to fight the Mexicans. Captain Naylor was one of the few men willing to take this organization into the war. When they arrived in Pittsburgh *en-route* to Mexico it was found necessary to await transportation to New Orleans. They were placed in barracks provided in the large Christy warehouse situated on Water Street, a short distance above Cherry Alley. The first night of their stay there they broke out and for awhile made 'a rough house' of Pittsburgh. Captain Naylor, whose quarters were in the Pittsburgh Hotel, located at the corner of Wood and Third streets, was soon on the ground and with his drawn sword drove his men back into their barracks. One soldier resisted and attempted to take away Captain Naylor's sword. The Captain gave him a cut in the face with his weapon, which necessitated the man being given into the care of the surgeon. Captain Naylor brought only a few of his men back from Mexico; the others died in battle fighting bravely for their country."

After residing in Pittsburgh for a few years, Captain Naylor returned to Philadelphia where he died on December 24, 1872, at the age of sixty six years. Mr. Herbst died on June 8, 1907, aged eighty years.

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- (7) DR. H. VONHOLST. *The Constitutional and Political History of the United States.* Chicago, 1888, Vol. 11 pp. 207-208.