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ERASTUS FAIRBANKS  
GOVERNOR OF VERMONT  
1852-1853, 1860-1861



## Erastus Fairbanks

By GRAHAM S. NEWELL

“WHEREAS an armed rebellion against the Government of the United States exists, the object of which is to subvert and revolutionize the Government; and whereas, the President of the United States through the Secretary of War, has made a requisition upon me for a regiment of men for immediate service, to which requisition I have responded by issuing the proper orders to the Adjutant and Inspector General . . .”<sup>1</sup>

With the penning of these opening sentences to his proclamation issued at his St. Johnsbury home Governor Erastus Fairbanks initiated Vermont's first official action in the Civil War. Dated the “15th day of April in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-one and of the Independence of the United States the Eighty-Fifth,”<sup>2</sup> the Fairbanks proclamation was written only a few hours after the St. Johnsbury telegraph operator had received the Lincoln requisition for one regiment from Vermont.

No other state reacted officially with such prompt dispatch.

That Vermont should have taken the lead in sustaining the Union at the outset; that Vermont was to set an early example in placing its treasure of men and materiel at the disposition of the Federal government can be attributed, in no small measure, to the dynamic leadership of Governor Erastus Fairbanks.

His was the kind of leadership that only a lifetime of dedicated interest in the public weal can develop. His was a character combining the attributes of patriotism and respect for the American heritage with those virtues cherished by the ancient Romans as *pietas* and *humanitas*. At Vermont's time of trial and testing, Erastus Fairbanks became veritably our Cincinnatus.

Six generations of New England forebears were behind Erastus Fairbanks, he being in the direct descent from Jonathan Fayerbancke who migrated to Boston in 1633 from Yorkshire. He was born in Brimfield, Massachusetts, in 1792.

1. *Vermont Senate Journal*, April 23, 1861.

2. *Ibid.*

When in his teens, his family moved to St. Johnsbury—father, mother, Erastus, and two younger brothers. The three brothers joined themselves with their father and pooling their mechanical talents established a small foundry business. Prospering, the firm branched into the manufacture of hoes, pitchforks, cast iron plows and stoves. In 1830, the inventive genius of the second brother, Thaddeus, conceived the device of a platform scale. The invention was immediately patented, and in 1834, the three brothers, Erastus, Thaddeus, and Joseph founded the firm of E. & T. Fairbanks & Company. This proved an unusually compatible triumvirate—each contributing singular talents.

Erastus, the elder brother, a born leader and recognized by his brothers as well as his contemporaries as a man of indomitable purpose and large views, became head of the manufacturing firm—a post he held until his death thirty years later.

As head of one of Vermont's fastest growing industries, Erastus Fairbanks' reputation grew. His skillful management brought him into increasingly wider areas of recognition.

In 1836, St. Johnsbury sent him to the legislature. Of Fairbanks a colleague in the House who served with him in committee work wrote:

In the execution of his official duties he was ardent, conscientious, and faithful; he retained the confidence of all parties, and I can confidently say that no man of my acquaintance in Vermont commanded more unqualified respect than he. Possessing good, practical sense, ready discrimination and great quickness of perception, he was a sagacious and prudent politician, a safe and judicious counselor and a successful business man.<sup>3</sup>

With his two brothers, he founded St. Johnsbury Academy in 1842 which he faithfully served as trustee until his death.

Fairbanks was chosen a presidential elector of the Whig party in 1844, again in 1848, and in that year declined a nomination for Congress. Meanwhile, he was vigorously promoting the construction of the Connecticut and Passumpsic River Railroad, of which he was the first president. In November, 1850 he had the satisfaction of greeting officially the arrival of the first locomotive that ran into his town of St. Johnsbury.

Two years later, 1852, Erastus Fairbanks was elected Governor of Vermont. In his opinion, probably the most important legislative act which he, as governor strongly supported through the General Assembly, was the prohibitory liquor law. Although this act remained substantially

3. E. T. Fairbanks, *The Town of St. Johnsbury*, (St. Johnsbury, 1914), 426.

in force for fifty years, immediate repercussions and opposition brought about his defeat in the next election.

A strict moralist, Fairbanks could be counted on in the exigencies of life to reveal his staunch Congregationalism. For fifty years he was a pillar of the Congregational Church; he served on many benevolent boards of his church, state and national, to which he was a liberal contributor of money and personal attention.

At the age of 68, he was called again to the governorship of Vermont; as events proved, it was to be a sharp testing of the mettle acquired from an already vigorous and lengthy public and private career of achievement. And in the greatest testing ever to face the state of Vermont, the chosen man filled and met the needs of the time.

Vermont's outstanding record in the Civil War familiar to all who have read the official chronicles is itself a lasting tribute to the man on whom the burden fell for making those early decisions which created this state's policy and triggered the multifold subsequent heroic actions.

Erastus Fairbanks' unswerving stand of fidelity to support the Union at all costs exemplified the type of leadership Vermonters wanted. And the sacrifices Governor Fairbanks called for were forthcoming.

Forthwith on assuming office, Governor Fairbanks, sensing imminent national crisis, appointed a day of fasting and prayer on January 4, 1861 "in view of the present critical condition of our common country."<sup>4</sup>

On the day following the issuance of the fast day proclamation the Governor wrote Governor Buckingham of Connecticut asking his advice as to the expediency of legislation looking to the cooperation of the free States in putting down a rebellion, should the plans of all the secessionists succeed and the capital be taken. He initiated correspondence with Vermont's congressional delegation on possible courses of action should an emergency develop.

In concert with governors of other free states, Governor Fairbanks urged Vermonters to fire salutes upon the anniversary of Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans. Accordingly, on January 8, 1861 the records of many of our towns reveal that salutes were fired at noon in honor, as Governor Fairbanks suggested, "of the Union of States and of Major Anderson, the gallant defender of the country's honor at Fort Sumter."

During the ensuing winter period, Governor Fairbanks authorized the Vermont Senators Foot and Collamer in Washington to notify President Buchanan that he stood ready to respond to any requisition

4. *Vermont Senate Journal*, October Session 1860, 251.

for troops, by calling into service the uniformed militia of Vermont and by accepting the service of volunteers as needed. And he had appointed five prominent Vermonters to represent Vermont at the ill fated Peace Conference called in February by the legislature of Virginia.

When that fateful day came in April and the announcement of the fall of Fort Sumter, Governor Fairbanks himself immediately wrote the document which in calling on Vermonters to give their all to preserve the Union, set the date April 23 for the convening of an extra session of the General Assembly.

That gubernatorial proclamation set a scene of immediate, enthusiastic public response. In town after town, at public rallies a reading of Governor Fairbanks' proclamation was received with stirring patriotic fervor.

When the legislature met on April 23, the Governor spoke before a joint session of the House and Senate. And his speech set the stage for and constituted the tone of the most momentous and unique legislative session in the history of Vermont. Said Governor Fairbanks in part:

I have now availed myself of the Constitutional provisions for convening the General Assembly into an extra session; never doubting that you, gentlemen, representing the universally expressed patriotism of the citizens of this State, will make all necessary appropriations and provisions for defraying the expenses already incurred and for placing our full military strength at the service of the General Government to the full extent and as immediately as it may be required.

We shall discredit our past history and our heritage should we, in this crisis, suffer Vermont to be behind her sister States, in her patriotic sacrifices for the preservation of the Union and the Constitution.

It is devoutly to be hoped that the mad ambition of the secession leaders may be restrained, and the impending sanguinary conflict averted, but a hesitating, half-way policy, on the part of the administration of the loyal States, will not avail to produce such a result.

The United States Government must be sustained and the rebellion suppressed, at whatever cost of man and treasure . . .<sup>5</sup>

Taking inspiration from the Governor's message, the General Assembly proceeded to respond promptly and, indeed, liberally. Within forty-two hours from the time the legislature convened, the Governor had signed into law an appropriation for one million dollars for war expenses and acts giving the governor authority for the organizing, arming and equipping not the one regiment requested from Vermont by President Lincoln—but seven. Further, provision was made for giving each private seven dollars a month in state pay, in addition to the

5. *Vermont Senate Journal, Extra Session, April 24, 1861.*

thirteen dollars offered by the Federal government; and lastly, provisions for a substantial war tax.<sup>6</sup>

Word of this momentous action soon reached the other states where it served as an incentive and a stimulus, and received wide spread comment. The *New York World* stated editorially in its edition of April 28:

Vermont has a population of but about 300,000, mostly farmers and yet has made an appropriation of \$1 million to aid in maintaining the stars and stripes. Many have done nobly; but none, resources considered, have equalled this.

Before the regular 1861 session of the legislature convened in October, Governor Fairbanks had carried out the mandate to the extent that six regiments had been raised and equipped, also two companies of sharp shooters and a squadron of cavalry.

Of these gubernatorial acts his Secretary of Civil and Military Affairs wrote:

It was in his new position as Commander in Chief that I again found the Governor master of the work he had to do. The responsibility was his; with a prayerful desire to be guided aright, his foresight and energy at once appeared when raising the first regiment sent out from Vermont.

The extra session of the Legislature which met eight days after the firing upon Fort Sumter, had the good sense to place at his entire disposal a million of dollars, putting no check upon the use of it, only as his judgment might deem prudent and best. Our people, unused to large public expenditure, it is true, kept a jealous eye upon all his acts, but never, to their praise, with a thought of any dereliction of duty or misuse of power on the part of the Executive.<sup>7</sup>

Prior to Governor Fairbanks' retirement from the office of chief executive, he requested the legislature to appoint a special committee to examine and audit his accounts. Subsequent to this report, the General Assembly adopted the following resolution:

Whereas, in consequence of the war in which the country has been engaged new, arduous, and peculiar duties have devolved upon the Executive, involving great responsibilities and calling forth great administrative ability, therefore

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Vermont—

That the thanks of the two Houses be presented to Erastus Fairbanks, late Governor, for his most laborious, efficient, and praise worthy efforts to raise, equip and uniform the six regiments of volunteers that have been sent forward from this state to the seat of war.

6. *Laws of Vermont Passed at the Extra Session*, April 1861.

7. Fairbanks MSS in St. Johnsbury Athenaeum.

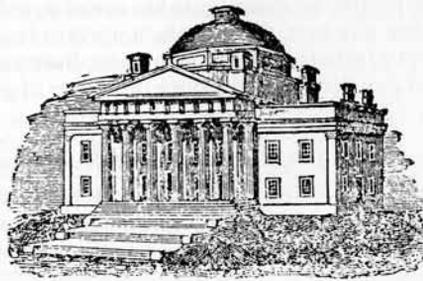
Resolved, that we, as representatives of the people, do appreciate the difficulties which beset the course of the Executive in the trying emergencies incidental to the inauguration of a militia system and a war policy among a people pre-eminently peaceful and we feel doubly gratified for the judgment which decided without wavering the path of duty, and the courage which pursued it to success.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the people of Vermont through their representatives tendered this accolade to Erastus Fairbanks.

Those closest to him knew that he firmly believed that he had been motivated in his solemn responsibility by a divine power. Inspired constantly by a deep sense of providential guidance, Erastus Fairbanks dedicated himself to the service of Vermont and the Union.

The exactions of that service left their mark on the man and deeply strained his health. Three years later, at the age of 72 years, he passed on. Although he was not to witness the ultimate triumph of the cause he so nobly served, it may be said of Governor Fairbanks that he died on that November day of 1864 in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off.

8. Resolution 77, *Acts and Resolves, General Assembly of the State of Vermont*, October Session, 1861.



VERMONT STATE HOUSE

1842