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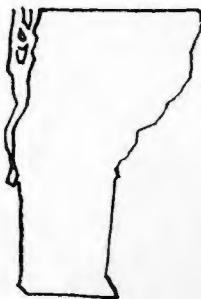


VERMONT

History



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The Wide-Awakes helped build enthusiastic support for Lincoln and also helped to build the unusual solidarity and commitment of Vermont in the tragic events which followed his election.

ORGANIZE! ORGANIZE! The Lincoln Wide-Awakes in Vermont

By GLENN C. HOWLAND

On July 20, 1860, the Bellows Falls *Times* printed an editorial calling out to all concerned citizens with headlines urging Republicans to "Organize! Organize!" The editorial panned the party faithful who had "the idea of having a live Republican organization in Vermont, where some 20,000 sleepy voters each year stay away from the polls." The editorial writer thought that a "Thirty thousand majority can easily be given to [Erastus] Fairbanks for Governor . . . [and] There ought to be a thorough organization of friends of Lincoln and Hamlin in every town of the state."¹

The editor closely predicted the results of voter enthusiasm and Vermont's support of Abraham Lincoln and Hannibal Hamlin in their 1860 campaign for President and Vice-President of the United States. The organization of the Wide-Awakes, largely ignored by historians, provided a means to build grass roots support for Lincoln and became one of the most powerful political forces of the 1860 Presidential campaign.

The origins of the Wide-Awakes began on a cold day in February, 1860, in Hartford, Connecticut, where, to aid in the coming state election, the noted abolitionist, Cassius Clay, gave a "thorough-going Republican speech" which the approving crowd received with hearty applause and such enthusiasm that it was reluctant to let him go. A group of young people, caught up with the spirit of the day, organized an impromptu parade to escort Clay back to the Allyn House Hotel. Making do with what they could readily find, they borrowed torches from the firehouse, while drygoods clerks D.G. Francis and H.P. Blair glazed cambric capes and protective caps which they used for uniforms. Marching with grand style, the cheering and raucous youths, accompanied by the local band and townspeople, led Clay down the road to the hotel unaware that

their actions would soon be duplicated in many towns in the North. The movement quickly expanded from a small abolitionist celebration to the grass roots as Republicans, in their enthusiasm for Lincoln, organized thousands of Wide-Awake organizations within a matter of months.²

To their unity of purpose the small clubs quickly joined a unified method of operation. A local club would meet, usually once a week in the evening, and the membership would participate in drills and attract crowds as they marched to the music of a community band. Each member, wearing a cambric cape and a glazed cambric hat, would parade with friends through the streets of the village, torches and lanterns held high. Townspeople would often join the procession extemporaneously, burning tar barrels and engaging in any means of excitement they could find.³ The proceedings resulted in a large, noisy parade of celebrants, gleefully letting off steam. Local Wide-Awake chapters would put together banners and signs for the parades, carrying mottoes such as "Free Soil, Free Spirit, and Free Men," "No More Slave Territories," or "United We Stand, Divided We Fall."⁴ Often a club would possess a split rail or some other symbol of its support of Lincoln. One group of Wide-Awakes paraded in a zigzag fashion, illustrating a rail fence. On special occasions, the Wide Awake organizations from small towns would gather for giant torchlight processions ranging from 1,000 to 10,000 of the faithful. Ten thousand marched in Plattsburgh, New York, and in one of the most enthusiastic displays of support on August 8, 1869, over 75,000 people marched through Lincoln's home town of Springfield, Illinois, in a procession over eight miles long. An eyewitness who found the parade "one of the most enormous and impressive gatherings" he had ever witnessed, compared it with "the review by Napoleon of his army for the invasion of Russia" in 1812.⁵

With their massive numbers, unbridled enthusiasm, and maneuvers which approached military drills, the Wide-Awake organization spread rapidly, attracting Lincoln Republicans and arousing fear and suspicion within Democratic ranks and supporters of Stephen A. Douglas. The paramilitary nature of the organization helps explain why fighting attended many Wide-Awake activities.⁶

The aggressive contagion of the Wide-Awakes quickly moved up the Connecticut River from Hartford, Connecticut, into Vermont where the press reported their exuberant activities. In early September, 1860, the Burlington *Times* carried news of the impending organization of the "Burlington Wide-Awake Club." A "prominent Republican from Williston" had informed the *Times* that along with one hundred uniformed members of the Williston Club, others from "Essex, Shelburn [sic], Hinesburgh, Charlotte, Richmond, Milton, Jericho, etc. will easily send three or four

hundred more." The Williston man thought "that *uniforms will be provided for at least 500 Chittenden County Wide-Awakes.*"⁷

Burlington had already witnessed the onslaught of the Wide-Awakes where previously they had gathered for what the *Times* thought promised to become "one of the largest political demonstrations of the campaign." The Lake Champlain "steamers *Canada, Montreal, and Boston*, with delegates from North and South, Albany, Troy, Saratoga, Whitehall and points this side and also from St. Albans" arrived at Burlington to embark the multitude gathered there for a rally in Plattsburgh.⁸ The climax of the successful Plattsburgh demonstration "was reserved for the evening when about 9 P.M. . . . the Wide-Awakes to a number of one thousand assembled with their torches of liberty all flaming for the 'irrepressable conflict' . . . and prepared to march in [a] solid Republican column through the street." Another account which escalated the number of marchers to a "grand Republican torch-light procession of over FIVE THOUSAND torches" attempted to win over the traditionally Democratic Irish population by an enthusiastic description of the participation of Wide-Awake Clubs formed by the "multitudes of the Irish adopted citizens" of New York State.⁹

The Wide-Awakes came to the eastern part of Vermont several months before the organization of the Burlington club, as many Connecticut River towns began to organize early in the summer of 1860. In June the Bellows Falls *Times* announced the formation of the "Lincoln Wide-Awakes" of Rockingham which it hoped would "*wake up* the Republicans, who, in this state, for want of any opposition in Vermont, are apt to be decidedly sleepy."¹⁰ From Chester, Asa Davis, who lived in the village on Main Street, wrote to his son describing the Wide-Awakes "waking up" there. The Wide-Awakes "have bought," Davis wrote, "two large flags 30 x 20 feet each & are going to have them raised Saturday [June 30, 1860?] & are going to have quite a time. Some speeches from distinguished individuals are expected and H.H. Henry will tell about the Chicago nomination & the Chester band are [sic] to play patriotic music. . . . The Democrats," Davis continued, "look rather crestfallen. They seem to be like the hungry Ass between two stacks of hay, that doesn't know which one to take."¹¹

Despite their rough and tumble, boisterous nature, the Wide-Awakes attracted many prominent citizens. Hugh Horatio Henry, Jr., the President of the Chester Wide-Awakes, had attended the Republican National Convention in Chicago as a district delegate. He joined his fellow delegates from Vermont and cast his first ballot for favorite son candidate Senator Jacob Collamer. On the second ballot, the Vermont delegation, which tended to favor William H. Seward, became the first pro-Seward

delegation to switch to Lincoln.¹² A native of Rockingham, Henry had begun school in Chester and then attended both Phillips Exeter and Deerfield Academies before going to Dartmouth, where he graduated in 1833. A lawyer in Chester, Henry helped organize and then served as president of the Vermont Valley Railroad, which ran from Bellows Falls to Brattleboro. A Democrat, his strong anti-slavery views pushed him first into the Free Soil Party and then to the Republicans. He represented Chester for twelve terms in the General Assembly and later served as Senator from Windsor County.¹³ Henry could easily tell the excited villagers at Chester about the Chicago convention and the nomination of Abraham Lincoln.

Similarly in Springfield leadership of the Wide-Awakes came from a prominent group active in political affairs. William Walker, a lawyer and a graduate of Black River Academy and Middlebury College, served as vice-president of the Wide-Awakes. Following the political agitation in the summer of 1860, he went to Montpelier as a representative and later as a Senator from Windsor County. He later served Windsor County as State's Attorney and subsequently became a Justice of the Vermont Supreme Court.¹⁴ Despite their voluntary nature, the Wide-Awakes' organizations required the support of the financially successful and the politically active who could organize and manage the activities and who could raise the funds to carry them out.

And carry them out they did! As Asa Davis described to his son, "the Grand Rally came off." The festivities began when the "Chester Band marched over to the Depot accompanied by a large number of folks with torches ready to light" to meet the Rockingham Wide-Awakes. Even a heavy thunderstorm could not dampen enthusiasm. The Rockingham contingent included "about 2 or 3 hundred . . . , about 150 ladies and the B. [ellows] Falls band." Though many of the ladies stayed on board the train to avoid the rain and mud, the procession quickly formed with the bands playing and torches lighted.

Davis thought the procession made "a splendid sight." The marchers carried their torches "from the [boot shop] up to the Academy, the bands playing. . . . In large quantities rockets were fired into the air which added greatly to the beauty of the scene." They proceeded "down by the hotel and round the Park where opposite the Baptist meetinghouse the Chester folks opened up to the Right & Left & the [Rockingham] Wide-Awake procession passed through and the Chester folks gave them Cheer after Cheer." At the park, where a platform and seats had been erected for the occasion, the throng heard a song from the Rockingham Wide-Awakes, pieces from the bands, and several addresses as Chinese lanterns on the hotel illuminated the scene. "The performance closed about ½ past ten o'clock," because the "Rockingham folks" had to take

the train. With a song from the Chester Glee Club and Chorus the visitors departed, leaving behind the memory "of one of the most splendid sights ever seen in Chester."¹⁵

The Wide-Awake parades, flag raisings, picnics, speeches, bands and other activities which took place in Vermont helped keep the presidential campaign before the public. It provided people with a vehicle to gather in socially and exciting activities, lending a sense of urgency to the upcoming election. Individuals learned that their votes were needed, that they would make a difference. The Wide-Awakes also made "outsiders" feel welcome; people who had few means of social integration discovered that they could join the movement and attain a sense of belonging, as reflected in the strong support of Lincoln among immigrants, such as the Irish of Albany present at the Wide-Awake rally in Plattsburgh. The Wide-Awakes built from the ground up, as they made use of grass-roots support of the rural North and the spontaneous and intense involvement of ordinary citizens. In Vermont the Wide-Awakes helped build enthusiastic support for Lincoln and also helped build the unusual solidarity and commitment in the tragic events which followed his election.

NOTES

¹J.G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln—A History* (New York: The Century Co., 1890), II, 285, quoting William P. Fuller, editor of the *Hartford Courant* in 1860. Both Nicolay and Hay served as secretaries to Lincoln until his death.

²Emerson David Fite, *The Presidential Campaign of 1860* (MacMillan, 1911; rpt. New York: Kennikat Press, 1967), pp. 225-6.

³Davis MSS, Asa Davis to (his son) Gilbert A. Davis, November 13, 1860, Chester, Vermont, in the possession of Mary K. Howland, Windsor, Vt.

⁴Fite, *Campaign of 1860*, p. 227.

⁵Ida M. Tarbell, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 4 vols. (New York: Lincoln Memorial Association, date unknown), p. 370.

⁶*Burlington Times*, September 19, 1860.

⁷*Ibid.*, September 11, 1860.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*, September 19, 1860.

¹⁰June 19, 1860.

¹¹Davis MSS, Davis to Gilbert A. Davis, June 29, 1860.

¹²Walter H. Crockett, *Vermont: The Green Mountain State* (New York: The Century House Co., Inc., 1921-1923), III, 485-6.

¹³Arthur F. Stone, *Vermont of Today with its Historical Background, Attractions and People* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1929), IV, 926.

¹⁴Lewis Cass Aldrich and Frank R. Holmes, eds., *History of Windsor County, Vt., with illustrations and biographical sketches of some of its prominent men and pioneers* (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1891), p. 528.

¹⁵Davis MSS, Davis to Gilbert A. Davis, August 28, 1860.