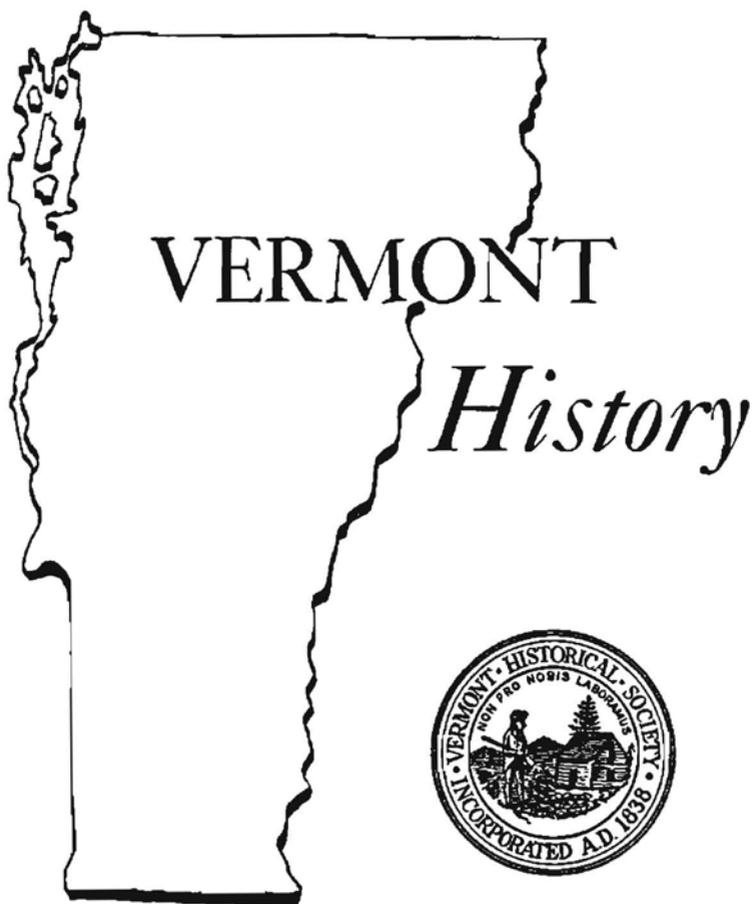
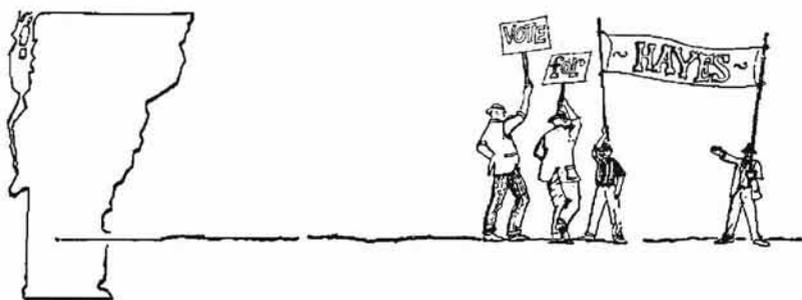


Autumn 1970

VOL. XXXVIII No. 4



The PROCEEDINGS of the
VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



An ex-Vermont, born in Hinesburg in 1813, played a key role in securing the Republican nomination for Rutherford Hayes in 1876 . . .

William A. Howard and the Nomination of Rutherford B. Hayes for the Presidency

By DOROTHY L. MOORE

WILLIAM ALANSON HOWARD, who was considered to be the person most responsible for getting President Rutherford B. Hayes the Republican nomination in 1876, was born in Hinesburg, Vermont, on April 8, 1813. His father, Dan, had been raised in the area of Bridgewater and Easton in Massachusetts, but since his mother had died when he was four, and his father had remarried, Dan cut loose from the family ties. He married Esther Spencer in Windsor, Vermont, and lived there for a time before moving to Hinesburg. He lived only four days after his second son, William Alanson Howard, was born, thus leaving his widow with two boys to raise on a farm.¹

The lessons of compassion for the "under-privileged" and the traditional frugality of rural Vermont were deeply etched on William A. Howard's character. Moreover the limitations of his childhood did not deter the development of his mind; in adult life he was considered brilliant, and his prowess as a speaker, often casting spellbinding effects on his audiences, was widely known. In his mature years Howard moved easily among the intellectual and political leaders of his time.

1. *The Howard Family, Descendants of John Howard of Bridgewater, Massachusetts*, by Heman Howard (Brockton, Mass., 1903), gives details about the forebears of William Alanson Howard.

Not surprisingly, young William, like his father, found the going tough at home and at the age of fourteen he began to look for greener pastures. He ventured first to New York, where he learned the cabinetmaker's trade. At 19 he went to Wyoming Academy in Wyoming, New York, and then to Middlebury College. He was graduated from Middlebury in 1839, after earning his way by bookkeeping, teaching school, and clerking. In 1840 he decided to move to Detroit, which he thought would be a "better climate." He married Jane Ellen Birchard in 1841 and they had seven children, two of whom died in infancy.²

Howard must have been a born joiner in causes and a persuasive talker. He made many friends in his new community. By 1844 he was elected president of the leading club, "the Young Men's Society." He lectured widely on temperance. He studied law in his spare time and served the city as attorney in 1836. He took an active part in the Whig Party.³ His personal courage showed when he offered to defend about forty men accused of looting and destroying property of the Michigan Central Railroad. In a situation which seems an echo of present turmoils, Howard argued forcefully against the "establishment"—the railroads which, at that time, represented a major concentration of wealth. This feeling was strong in Michigan and was partly a reason for the birth of the Republican Party, which drew many members from the liberal element of the Whig Party, including Howard. Not being a trial lawyer himself, Howard arranged to engage William H. Seward of New York to defend the group. Seward spent some time in Michigan, establishing a life-long friendship with Howard and reinforcing whatever anti-slavery feelings Howard had.⁴

Howard was a major proponent of strengthening the newly founded Republican Party. "To William A. Howard," wrote a Detroit newspaper reporter in 1882, "are we indebted, more than to any one man, for a consolidation of the anti-slavery elements into a political organization from 1854 to 1860."⁵ In 1854 Howard was nominated for Congress and served in the House of Representatives for six years. He helped the Republicans to secure the Speakership by electing Representative Nathaniel Banks of Massachusetts. Banks put Howard on the Ways And Means Committee and later made him chairman of the Kansas investigating committee to report on pro and anti-slavery skirmishes

2. Quoted by Martha M. Bigelow in "The Political Service of William Alanson Howard" in *Michigan History*, March, 1958, and taken from a newspaper clipping in the Howard scrapbook.

3. Bigelow, *op. cit.*

4. Bigelow, *op. cit.*

5. Bigelow, *op. cit.*

which were flaring up in "Bleeding Kansas." The report was a 1200-page catalog of pro-slavery wrongs; and the majority opinion summarized the evidence in convincing and ringing prose.⁶ At the expiration of his third term in 1860 he returned to Detroit, and was appointed Postmaster of that city by President Lincoln. There is a tradition in the Howard family that the Lincolns and the Howards were personal friends.

From 1860 to 1866 Howard was chairman of the Republican State committee and chairman of the Michigan delegation to the National Conventions of 1868 and 1872. In the latter year he cast Michigan's vote for Ulysses S. Grant. "Each time his [Howard's] name was mentioned there were loud cheers" and "he was spontaneously called for from the floor to address the convention."⁷ President Grant offered Howard the Ministry to China in 1869, but he had to decline for reasons of health and family.

Howard's other activities included positions as attorney for and president of the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad. Two towns on its route were named after him: Howard City, and Alanson. These positions caused the Howard family to move from Detroit to Grand Rapids in 1861 after 29 years of living in the former city. There were attempted booms for him as candidate for Senator, and also for Governor. However his poor health worked against him, and in rivalry between factions representing Detroit and Grand Rapids he was still identified as a Detroiter.

In 1876 he was again chairman of the Michigan delegation to the Republican National Convention. There was a strong feeling against the corruption that had occurred in Grant's administration: a candidate acceptable to the Republican liberals seemed essential to Howard. By personal influence he managed to keep the Michigan delegation uninstructed.

The National Convention in Cincinnati was exciting with the outcome completely uncertain up to the seventh ballot. James C. Blaine was a popular favorite but unacceptable to the liberals. Others were Oliver P. Morton of Indiana, Benjamin H. Bristow of Kentucky, Roscoe Conkling of New York, and Rutherford B. Hayes, of Ohio. On the fifth ballot the Michigan delegation, previously split three ways, switched to Hayes. A dispatch to the *New York Times*, described the dramatic moment which was decisive in getting Hayes the nomination: ". . . that

6. Report of the Special Committee appointed to Investigate the Troubles in Kansas with the Views of the Minority of Said Committee, in *House Reports*, Volume 2, Number 200, Pages 1-67 (34th Congress, 1st Session), Washington, D. C., 1856.

7. *Proceedings* of the Republican National Convention, 1872 . . .

veteran Republican, William A. Howard, stepped into the aisle leaning on his crutches and . . . said, 'Michigan, wishing to insure success in this contest, now desires to vote for the same man who has in succession defeated three Democratic aspirants for the Presidency . . . Michigan . . . now casts her twenty one votes for Rutherford B. Hayes, of Ohio.' The effect was electrical. Two thirds of the convention and the audience were on their feet in an instant, shouting and yelling, waving hats, handkerchiefs, and conducting themselves generally as men do when they had surprisingly good tidings . . . Michigan was the pivotal point upon which the whole thing turned, and it was a matter of rejoicing that he who had attended at the birth of the Republican Party had named the third of its Presidents."⁸ It took two more ballots to get the necessary majority, but Howard was credited with bringing it about. Hayes wrote promptly to Howard: "My estimate of your character enables me to rejoice that my gratitude is due to such a man."⁹

William A. Howard was urged by President Hayes to become Governor of the Dakotas, still a territory at that time. Fearing an adverse effect on his health he tried to decline but was pressed to accept. For two terms he worked hard to install a good educational system and good public institutions in the Dakota Territory. When he died in Washington while on a visit to the capital, on April 10, 1880, he was widely respected and held in great affection by the Dakotans, to whom he had been personally unknown two years earlier.

So far as we know, Howard and Hayes had not met before 1878. Yet Hayes' father lived in Brattleboro, and Howard was born in Hinesburg. Hayes' Vice-President, William A. Wheeler of Malone, New York, had been a student for two years at the University of Vermont and both his grandfathers had been pioneers in Vermont. Hayes' secretary, William M. Evarts, had a home in Windsor, Vermont (the town where William Howard's father had married and lived for a time). And Hayes might not have defeated Samuel Tilden by winning the disputed election returns if Vermont Senator George F. Edmunds, as explained in the previous article in this issue of *Vermont History* by Professor Norbert Kuntz, had not devised a way to resolve that difficulty. Thus the influence of Vermonters in the politics of the 1870's was much greater than the size of the Green Mountain State or its representation in Congress.

8. Bigelow, *op. cit.*

9. Bigelow, *op. cit.*