

## Lincoln and Minnesota – The 1860 Presidential Race

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Although Lincoln himself never set foot in our state, his presidency was an important part of our early history. The presidential campaign of 1860 was the state's first, and although Minnesota's delegates to the Chicago Convention initially backed Lincoln's chief rival, William H. Seward of New York, they threw their support to Abraham Lincoln when it became clear that the Illinois attorney was going to take the nomination. The head of Minnesota's delegation, Governor Alexander Ramsey, was well known in national Republican circles and had even been mentioned as a possible Vice-presidential candidate. His prominence and a desire for party unity led to Ramsey's appointment to the official delegation that traveled to Springfield, Illinois to formally offer Mr. Lincoln his party's nomination for the office of

President.



The campaign in Minnesota was mostly a local affair featuring the state's Republican leaders such as Ramsey, Ignatius Donnelly and Senator Morton S. Wilkinson. Local pro-Lincoln campaign organizations known as the "Wide-Awakes" marched in public demonstrations for their candidate. Wearing distinctive uniforms consisting of a waterproof cape

and military cap, they carried especially made torches in dramatic night-time parades which usually ended with a rally and campaign speech. But the national campaign did not entirely by-pass Minnesota. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it was considered undignified for presidential candidates to campaign in person, so surrogates went forth to "stump" for the candidate carrying the message of his campaign through their speeches both in person and in the local press. Perhaps nothing better demonstrates the importance of Minnesota to the Lincoln campaign than the fact that the most prominent of Mr. Lincoln's champions, his former rival, William Seward, included the new state on his itinerary.

Following campaign stops in Wisconsin, Seward and his party, which included Charles Francis Adams and Charles Francis Adams, Jr., traveled to St. Paul via steamboat from Prairie du Chien arriving on September 16, 1860. His visit culminated in a mass meeting on the steps of the state capitol on September 18, where the Senator from New York addressed a crowd estimated at 5,000 (the population of St. Paul in 1860 was just over 10,400). In his oration, lasting nearly two hours, Seward not only argued for his party's platform but also extolled the virtues of the Northwest as the "central point" of the continent where "the German and the Irishman, and the Italian, and the Frenchman, the Hollander and the Norwegian, becomes in spite of himself, almost completely in his own day, and entirely in his own children, an American citizen."<sup>1</sup>



William Seward

<sup>1</sup> St. Paul *Daily Times*, September 22, 1860.

His companions could not understand Seward's emphasis on this new state with few electoral votes. The elder Adams wrote, "I am a little at a loss to know why he laid so much stress upon this, at present at least, the weakest and most inefficient of the Northwestern cluster of States. But it has been all along evident to me that he cherishes it with more than a mere political affection, on account of the attachment manifested by its delegates to him at the Convention at Chicago."<sup>2</sup>

Certainly Seward had common bonds with local Republican leaders. Wilkinson had personal connections with both Seward and Lincoln while Ramsey shared long associations with the former Whig party. In the context of the Republican's national campaign however, a swing through a frontier state like Minnesota made sense. It allowed Lincoln's party to stress the "Free Soil" aspects of its policies and to give the campaign a platform to express its vision for the nation's future. Indeed Seward saw the region as the growing seat of political power in America. "We look to you of the Northwest to finally decide whether this is to be a land of slavery or of freedom." Seward told the St. Paul crowd. "The people of the Northwest are to be the arbiters of its destiny." These sentiments would appeal to voters in Iowa and Wisconsin, as well as to the crowd standing before the new Minnesota capitol building.

But as an old politician once observed, "All politics are local," and the local appeal for the Republican campaign was the issue of Federal lands. Many Minnesota settlers had "preempted" their lands. That is, they had claimed lands before the official survey had been completed and would need to formally purchase them when the lands were officially offered for sale. This would not have been a problem in an ordinary economy but the financial situation in Minnesota was anything but normal. Cash was scarce in the new state and the crash of 1857 had caused land values to plummet creating a situation in which those holding preempted lands would not have the ability to bid on what they saw as their own property. Although President Buchanan had agreed to postpone sales, the Democratic Party had been slow to respond to this issue while the Republicans had introduced and passed legislation creating a homestead act and postponing land sales for ten years. Buchanan had unwisely vetoed this bill, thus surrendering the issue to the Republicans. Slavery was also an important issue but the land question was a more immediate one to Minnesota voters.<sup>3</sup>

These issues and a split Democratic Party resulted in an overwhelming Lincoln victory in Minnesota, a nearly two to one margin (22,069 for Lincoln to 11,920 for Douglas), a far larger margin than he won elsewhere. This victory cemented the dominance of the Republican Party in Minnesota politics for decades to come.

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<sup>2</sup> Diary of Charles Francis Adams quoted in, Blegen, Theodore, "Campaigning with Seward", Minnesota History, Vol.8, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> Haugland, John C. *Alexander Ramsey and the Republican Party* p.100 -101. Unpublished Dissertation.