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PROMINENT DEMOCRATS OF ILLINOIS

A BRIEF HISTORY

OF THE

RISE AND PROGRESS OF THE DEMOCRATIC
PARTY OF ILLINOIS

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

OF WELL KNOWN DEMOCRATIC LEADERS, TOGETHER WITH
PORTRAIT LIKENESSES OF MANY
FAMILIAR FACES

THESE AND OTHER FEATURES, LINKED WITH EDITORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND
COMMENTS FROM OUR BEST WRITERS AND SPEAKERS

A CHRONICLE OF IMPORTANT EVENTS AND HAPPENINGS IN ILLINOIS FROM THE BIRTH OF THE PARTY
TO THE PRESENT TIME.

1899
DEMOCRAT PUBLISHING CO.
1109 Ashland Block
CHICAGO

INTRODUCTORY.

BY GEN. JOHN C. BLACK.

Illinois was admitted as a state in the year 1818. The enabling acts had been, owing to the slow processes of that time, many months in passing through the congress and through the territorial legislature; but at last a constitution was presented which was acceptable to the congress.

Illinois was the first state admitted to the Union after the passage of the existing law in regard to the American flag and its star was the first star that appeared under that law in the national field. Those who believe in auguries and omens may well take great satisfaction from this fact.*

The convention which framed the constitution of 1818 was Democratic. The governor elected thereunder was a Democrat, as were his nine successors, and from 1820 until 1856 substantially every representative in congress, every senator, every governor was Democratic. The population of Illinois was largely Democratic, made such by the sources from which it flowed in, from the east and from the south alike. In the southern portion of the state the population was recruited almost wholly from Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Maryland and the Carolinas. Some came from Ohio and Indiana, but they in turn were from the states above named and from western Pennsylvania. Western Pennsylvania was at that early day all Democratic. In the central portion of the state, especially in the Military Tract region lying about the Illinois river, the population was drawn from the soldiery of the Continental army and the war of 1812, who had been largely Democratic and who easily fell in with the party prevailing in the southern portion of the state. The character of that population may be gathered from the names given to the counties and villages which they organized as the country settled up: Boone, Bureau, Clark, Coles, St. Clair, Green, Macon, Montgomery are a few of the illustrious patriotic names fastened forever in the geography of the state by the early settlers, and evidently their origin, their affection and their patriotism.

Perhaps the most tremendous power in the continued harmonious ascendancy of the Democratic party was the character and leadership of President Jackson. The people believed in him; they trusted him; they loved him; they all but worshiped him, and long after his death his great name was a rallying cry of the plain people. He was absolutely honest; he was fearless; he knew the people; and these were the sources of his power, as great and enduring in Illinois as anywhere else in the Union.

The result of all this was, as before stated, that for the first thirty-eight years of its statehood Illinois was reliably Democratic.

The occasions for the change in its political relationship were two:

First, the Democratic party itself throughout the nation was split into opposing camps upon the question of slavery—not the question of slavery as being right or wrong per se, but the question of the policy that should be adopted toward it, by the federal government, by the free states, and in the territories. Mr. Buchanan's administration by the force of events and associations was at the head of the pro-slavery portion, and the growing greatness of Stephen A. Douglas, making him the most formidable rival of Mr. Buchanan, arrayed his friends against Mr. Buchanan and his policy. While the rupture was not consummated until 1860 it began as early as 1852, and slowly widening finally became a complete schism.

In the controversy between these two leaders the vast majority in the state of Illinois was found arrayed under the leadership of Mr. Douglas. A small number, however, influenced in part by their early life and in part by the force of public patronage, remained with the administration; enough to weaken and divide the counsels of the party and prepare the way for disaster.

But the great reason for the overthrow of the Democratic party in Illinois in 1856 was the record made by the governor in regard to the Canal funds and securities. It has been a long time since the occurrence of the events of Governor Matteson's administration and it would be idle to speak in detail of, or to revive, ancient accusations; it is sufficient to say upon this point that despite the magnificent leadership of Douglas, then a member of the United States Senate and already greatly prominent in national affairs, the accusations and scandals of the Matteson period resulted, in connection with the widening differences between the pro-slavery wing of the party and the Douglas wing, in seating Col. Bissell as governor.

It ever is so in a commonwealth like Illinois, greatly permeated by the free-school system, and where the teaching of every day from pulpit and desk is that of common honesty; where the courts have been free from scandal; and where malefactors have been long punished; the allegation of dishonesty in high places leads to question, and if the allegation is found to be sustained, to certain overthrow. "The thing that has been is the thing that will be, and there is no new thing under the sun."

During all the years that had preceded Governor Matteson's administration the affairs of Illinois had been conducted purely, simply, economically. The state, it is true, had been under the craze of the internal improvement scheme, but that had involved all parties and all sections alike in a common delusion, and no political results other than personal arose therefrom. There was no change in administration, no shaking of public faith in the Democratic party, no weakening of the affectionate regard in which its men and its measures were held.

During this period of time the Mexican war was conducted to a successful termination. To this war Illinois contributed six regiments, nearly all of which were drawn from the southern end of the state and two of which obtained high glory on foreign fields, contributing the names of successful officers to the permanent archives of the honor of the state.

Settled, as before stated, as Illinois had been, by the descendants of the Revolutionary soldiers and the soldiers of the war of 1812; represented as she had been by six thousand men in the Mexican war, it was not any wonder that her people were filled with martial spirit; no wonder that the vast mass of her people were intensely devoted to the service of the Flag; and when the end came the rally of

the Democratic party in 1861 was almost unanimous under the leadership of Stephen A. Douglas, assisted by Logan, McClernand and others of fame.

In the preliminary contentions the party had parted company upon free soil questions with some of its greatest intellects. Trumbull and John M. Palmer were among the men who joined the Republican party as early as Bissell's time, yet who, such is the inherent vitality of Democratic teaching, returned to the councils of the party at a later period in their careers.

In closing this very rapid and meagre sketch there is only space to add that while Pope and Breese and Edwards, Coles and Carlin and Ford are remembered, while Palmer and Trumbull and Douglas continue as leaders of thought, there can be no underestimating the splendid career of the united and patriotic Democracy of early Illinois.

And from a review of all its history the conclusion arises that it was opposed to corrupt measures and to corrupt men; that, being drawn from the body of the people, it represented the rights of person and of property alike; that it secured public confidence by the honesty of its intentions and by the certainty of the punishment it administered to its criminals; that it was an intensely patriotic body of men, as evidenced by its action rather than when tried by the lesser standard of the interested speech of a few; and there is no more magnificent sight in the history of a people than that presented to the student of our history when remarking how under the leadership of the great Senator, the Democratic party of this state laid aside all its dissensions and bickerings and united almost as one man in support of an imperiled Republic.