

DUSTY ROADS®



by Dean Karau

February 2021

Kewanee's 1856 Republican Party Mass Convention

8,000 to 10,000 People Attended the Largest Event in the Village's Brief History

The Founding Fathers distrusted political parties. Nevertheless, political divisions arose and political parties soon developed. First there were Federalists (strong central government) versus Jeffersonian Republicans (limited government). Then the former dissolved and the latter became Democratic-Republicans but evolved into the Democratic Party of Andrew Jackson, essentially today's Democrats. Jackson's opponents soon formed the Whig Party.

In the 1850s, slavery and its expansion into new territories and states led to the formation of a new

party comprised of Whigs, disgruntled northern Democrats, and others.

The first meeting of what became the new Republican Party was in Ripon, Wisconsin, in the spring of 1854. Two months later in Jackson, Michigan, Republicans selected their first statewide candidates. The party held its first national organizing convention in Pittsburgh in February 1856, and its first nominating convention in Philadelphia in June 1856.

In March 1856, Kewanee and Wethersfield Republicans called for a local convention for the promotion of a "true Republican sentiment." They met on March 7 at the Congregationalists' meeting house (at the time in the West School House). The attendees included Geo. W. Foote, J. F. Goodrich, J. H. Howe, Nelson Lay, Henry G. Little, O. H. Loomis, J. B. Maxom, J. V. Montgomery, Geo. A. Morse, J. R. Morse, R. P. Parrish, Norman H. Pratt, J. A. Pratt, J. R. Preston, D. C. Skinner, H. L. Sloan, J. R. Sloan, S. Sloan, A. Thornton, Jr., H. M. Way, T. Wiley, Jr., and J. F. Willard.



THE GREAT REPUBLICAN REFORM PARTY CALLING ON THEIR CANDIDATE

"The Great Republican Reform Party Calling on their Candidate," 1856 political cartoon by Louis Maurer

Republican Rally.

The Republicans of Kewanee, Wethersfield and vicinity, are hereby cordially invited and requested to meet at the Congregational Meeting House in Kewanee on Friday evening, the 7th of March, at 6 o'clock, for the purpose of effecting a thorough organization for the coming contest and for the promotion of a true Republican sentiment in this precinct.

Freemont! to your arms!

March 5, 1856, Rock
Island Weekly Advertiser

Many of those men had been active Whigs and fervent abolitionists vehemently opposed to the policies of Jackson and Martin VanBuren.

The March 5, 1856, Rock Island Weekly Advertiser reprinted a story from Kewanee's newspaper, The Henry County Dial, about the meeting. It reported that the group spoke of the "deep dishonor inflicted upon the age in which we lived" by opening the Kansas and Nebraska territories to slavery. As a result of that and other actions being perpetrated by the Democrats, they created the Republican Club of Kewanee and unanimously adopted a platform and constitution. They recommended that Henry County form a similar club and that the platform and constitution be forwarded to state and national leaders and local and state newspapers.



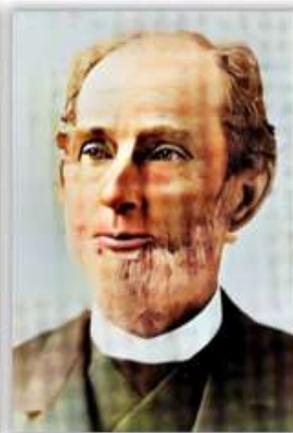
Chicago's Daily Democratic Press reported that in June, the Republican Club of Kewanee met to ratify the activities of the Republican State Convention. In addition, the Kewaneeans excoriated President Franklin Pierce, finding him, "as they did [England's King] George IV, 'unfit to be the ruler of a free people'" and resolved that he should be voted out of office. They similarly denounced the "treachery" of Illinois U. S. Senator Stephen Douglas for his support of the expansion of slavery into the territories.

In August, the Rock Island Weekly Advertiser reported that at a mass Republican meeting in Cambridge, it was resolved that another mass convention would be held in Kewanee on September 25 for Republicans from Knox, Warren, Mercer, Stark, Henry, and Rock Island counties. (Among the invited speakers was the "Hon. Abram [sic] Lincoln," although there is no evidence that he attended the convention.)

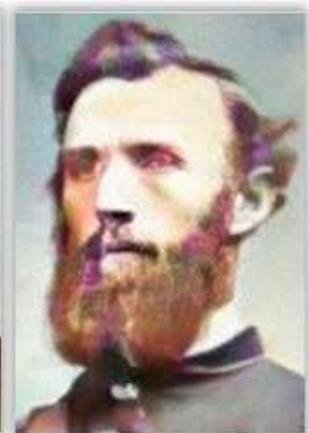
By the beginning of September, plans were underway for the convention, which would include a free dinner for up to 20,000 attendees, and "Bands of Music, Glee Clubs, &c., &c. will be present to contribute to the pleasure of the day." A special train would leave Mendota at 6:00 a.m., connect with the morning train from Rock Island at Wyanet, and return at



H. G. Little



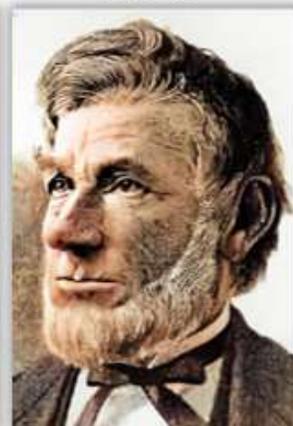
N. Lay



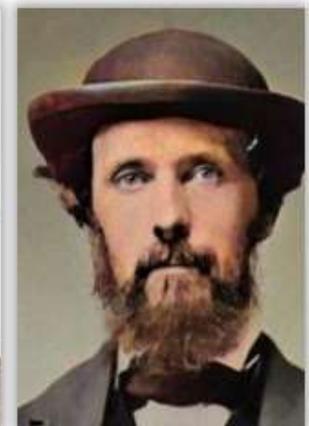
J. H. Howe



R. P. Parrish



J. F. Willard



O. H. Loomis

6:00 p.m. The eastbound train from Burlington would arrive in Kewanee at 10:00 a.m. and return at 4:00 p.m. Freight trains would also stop for passengers both ways. Kewanee Republicans appointed volunteer marshals to be located at the station and various streets to meet and escort the delegations into town and "provide for their comfort."

On Thursday morning, September 25, Kewanee was astir with activity in final preparation for the mass convention. Soon the delegates and convention attendees alike began arriving by horse, wagon, and train. By mid-morning, between 8,000 and 10,000 Republicans were in our hometown.

The voting delegates for state senator for the district met in Cutter's Hall (considered practically palatial in its day), on the northeast corner of Tremont and Third Streets, kitty corner from the Kewanee House and close to the railroad freight house and makeshift train depot. Kewaneean Julius A. Pratt was one of the eight Henry County delegates.

The other attendees formed a procession, many carrying banners and other displays, and were guided by marshals to the speaking ground (likely the public



Cutter's Hall (left), facing Tremont Street at the intersection with Third Street and kitty-corner from the Kewanee House

square at East Park, today's Veterans Park). Along the way, they were entertained by performers portraying Democrat leaders behaving like "Border Ruffians," the name given to pro-slavery terrorists from Missouri operating in the Kansas Territory to attack anti-slavery settlements. One, dressed as Stephen Douglas, gave a speech in a "near imitation of the little giant in voice manner and style of language as to excite the greatest admiration and elicit storms of applause. . . . The general verdict was that the speaker [Douglas] certainly deserved a place . . . in the councils of . . . Satan."



1856 political cartoon showing portrays Democratic leaders as jovial and unscrupulous marauders.

Then, after the first serious speaker concluded, dinner was announced. The Kewaneeans had set up public tables throughout the village. "Every republican house in the place was thrown open and tables were set out, loaded with necessaries and luxuries, so that it was impossible to go amiss in getting a dinner anywere fit to set before a king"

In the afternoon, more speeches were given. Then the Lafayette Republicans were awarded the prize banner for the largest delegation, 500 men in ad-

dition to accompanying women and children.

A Rock Island Daily Advertiser report praised Kewanee and its citizenry for the convention:

"We know of no better republicans, politically, and personally no more active, energetic, good fellows in the world. When they undertake to do anything it is put through on the fast line or the fault is not theirs. Let them all come [to the next scheduled meeting] and we will guarantee them as good treatment as we can afford, but do not expect to come up to their standard in that particular."

The Geneseo Republic and Henry County News lauded Kewanee and its Republicans as well: "The Kewaneeans did themselves great honor by the magnitude and excellence of their arrangements for the occasion."

Kewanee, only a little over two years after it was platted and less than two years after the first train arrived and had grown rapidly – over 60 businesses were operating in the village. Our hometown had become a player in Republican politics.