

Republican Party 'born in Camillus'

By Susan Cureau

If political tempers wax uncomfortably warm during election year in Camillus, residents can look back on a century-old political tradition for reassurance. Political sentiment should run deep in a community which claims to be the birth-place of the modern Republican Party.

Camillus' Republican tradition dates back 121 years. According to a history published in 1860 by the Syracuse Daily Journal, influential residents of traditionally Democratic Camillus "had grown dissatisfied" with their party's lukewarm attitude toward slavery. In January, 1852, 342 town electors signed and circulated a proposal for a new party. The proposal outlined an ideology adopted by the formal Republican organization two years later.

"Those of you who are opposed to the Fugitive slave Law, to the extension of slavery over Free Soil, to the admission of any more Slave States, and are disposed to waive former political preference and party predilections and unit your strength that your influence may be felt in the cause of Freedom and Humanity, are cordially invited to meet with us at Rowe's Hotel, on the 27th day of January inst. At 2 p.m. to nominate officers to be elected at the next town meeting."

Politics indeed makes strange bedfellows. A coalition organization of old line Democrats conservative Hunkers, liberal Barnburners, Whigs and radical Loco-Focos rallied to the call to Rowe's Hotel. They called themselves "Free Soilers" and nominated an antislavery ticket for the coming election.

In February the Free Soil Slate won handily. Party organizer David A. Munro was elected town supervisor by an uncontested majority of 395 to 5.

One Camillus resident called the Free Soil victory a "triumph of the true democracy." Philip A. Munro, David's grandson, recalled the event in a letter written nearly a century later"

"Members of my generation," he wrote, "are the only ones alive today who heard from the lips of their Grandfathers the real inside story of the intense anti-slavery feeling in the North during the pre-Civil War days."

"For 21 years I lived across the street from my Grandfather, David A. Munro, and I lived with him the last years of his life. Hence I know whereof I speak and all my life have had a thorough understanding of the meaning of the phrase 'having the courage of one's convictions.'

"Over a century ago," Munro continued, "the Abolitionists were raving and ranting in New York without any constructive result. Grandfather decided to do something about it and wrote the Proclamation, calling for a new Party, which he and his fellow townsmen signed."

Camillus' claim to Party Fame, however, has sparked historical controversies as heated as its political contests. The lofty sentiments of Philip's grandfather and his neighbors did not clinch for Camillus the title of birthplace of the Republican Party. Although the principles outlined in the Camillus proclamation

were later adopted by the formal Republican organization, Camillus residents were not the first to call themselves Republicans.

That honor goes to Ripon, Wisconsin, which claims that the first Republican meeting was held on February 28, 1854 in a little white school house on the Ripon College Campus.

In the same year, Jackson, Michigan adopted the name "Republican" at its state convention on July 6, 1854. The convention nominated Kingsley S. Bingham – a Camillus native – for governor, Bingham was elected in November.

Local historians, who have long pooh-poohed Midwestern claims, staunchly defend Camillus' honor. "The birth of the Party stands out in every word of the Proclamation," Philip Munro wrote, "The new Party was named Free Soil and news of its success spread, creating the enthusiasm for the 1854 meetings."

Onondaga Historical Association President Richard N. Wright assured Onondaga County Republicans in 1971 that "there is no doubt that the baby was christened in Ripon. But before the christening, the child had had to be born, and the Republican Party was born in Onondaga County."

Syracuse historian D.H. Bruce wrote in his Onondaga Centennial that "it is noted in the history of the Town of Camillus that a meeting was held there in 1852, which became heralded as the first Republican meeting preceding the organization of the Second Republican Party in 1854."

And in 1952, while writing "Among the Hills of Camillus," former Camillus historian Mary Ellis Maxwell searched in vain for proof of an older Republican organization. She concluded: "We have been able to find no record of an earlier victor of the coalition party which was ultimately named Republican."

The Syracuse claims have not convinced Ripon and Jackson residents, who launched a furious letter campaign when Camillus announced its Republican Party Centennial Celebration in July, 1952. Such unlikely candidates as Strong, Maine, Seneca Falls, New York, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania have since claimed themselves cradles of the Republican Party.

Camillus blithely ignored the competition in 1952 and invited former Republican County Committee Chairman George L. Traister to dedicate a commemorative plaque, later placed on the Camillus Bank at the site of the old Rowe's Hotel.

Historians may never convince Camillus that Ripon is right and Jackson's claims are just, but it is a fact that the groundwork was laid for a strong Republican organization in Onondaga County before the Civil War.

Legend has it that on June 17, 1854, New York Tribune Editor Horace Greeley, Syracuse Daily Journal Editor Vivius W. Smith, and Thurlow Weed of Albany met under an elm tree at West Onondaga Street and South Avenue in Syracuse to make plans for the new Republican organization.

The elm tree has since fallen victim to time and disease, and cynical historians argue that according to early photographs the tree was small for anyone to stand under. Richard Wright admitted that historians cannot place the three men in Syracuse at one time, but a plaque placed on a nearby apartment house marks the spot of the alleged meeting place.

It is a matter of record, however, that the first Republican County Convention was held at City Hall in Syracuse in 1865. A state convention held in Syracuse in the same year laid the foundation for the State Republican organization. In 1856 Syracuse Republicans sent their first representative, General Amos P. Granger, to Congress.

Four years later Syracuse helped put Abraham Lincoln in the White House and sent its sons to fight the Civil War. The Syracuse Herald looking fondly back in 1899, remembered that “the people of Onondaga County were always pronounced in their devotion to the principle of liberty. They entered enthusiastically into the national movement for the over throw of the slave power in the government and the restriction of the extension of slavery.”

Although the Republican Party undoubtedly appreciated Syracuse’s enthusiastic support, it made Ripon its official birthplace. In 1954, however, the Party’s centennial yearbook recognized Camillus as an early Republican stronghold and included a copy of the Camillus proposal in the annals of Party History.