

The Free Soil Party Convention in Buffalo

August 9 & 10, 1848

By John Fagant

The city of Buffalo played a vital role not only in the 1848 presidential election but also in the rising antislavery movement of the same year.

The June party convention for the Whigs in Philadelphia nominated Zachary Taylor for president and a Buffalonian – Millard Fillmore – for vice-president. Fillmore was well known to the national Whig party members as he had served for several years in Congress, including a stint as the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee (1841-1843). He was one of the favorites to receive the 1844 vice-presidential nomination until New York State politics interfered to keep the nomination away from him. However, four years later and not expecting the role, Fillmore was placed on the national ticket.

Just weeks after having one of its own chosen as a vice-presidential candidate, Buffalo played host to an extremely important political convention; that of the Free Soil Party – arguably the most important third party in American history.

During the second week of August, in the midst of a hot, sweltering summer heat, 20,000 strong (some estimated as high as 40,000) poured into the Queen City to form a new political party. Diverse members of the major parties were present- New York “Barnburners” and the Wilmot Proviso Democrats, the “Conscience” Whigs from New England, zealous antislavery Whigs, most notably from the Western Reserve in Ohio and Wisconsin. Also in Buffalo were abolitionists, Liberty Party men, Henry Clay men, Land Reformers and even several African-Americans. Men who were well known to the country were in attendance- Salmon Chase (future justice of the Supreme Court), Charles Francis Adams (a son of the 6th president and grandson to the 2nd), and Frederick Douglass, the African-American who had escaped to freedom just a few years earlier and was now an editor of an abolitionist newspaper. There was one delegate in the crowd who would gain fame just a few years later as the American poet, Walt Whitman.

They had all united to form a new political party; one that would take into consideration their demands that the two major parties – the Democrats and the Whigs- had rejected. And what were those demands? – That slavery would not be allowed in any of the land acquired from Mexico during the recent war. All the free northern & western states were represented and most interestingly, also three of the slave states – Maryland, Delaware and Virginia.

The massive throng met for two days under the Tent in the Park on Courtyard square,, on what is now the Soldier Monument in Lafayette Square. Speaker after speaker entertained the crowd with flash and oratory. But the one the crowd called for and insisted on hearing was a Congressman from the Yankee populated Western Reserve of northeastern Ohio, who had fought the slave power for the past decade, and was one of the earliest of the antislavery Whigs, Joshua Giddings of Ashtabula, Ohio. Giddings gave them what they wanted, culminating his talk in praising the crowd as

“for the first time in our political history, a Convention assembled from seventeen states in the Union ... coming thousands of miles ... to open questions of great magnitude, yet forgetting all their differences, and bringing together a congregation of free hearts and free minds, for the purpose of deliberating upon one of the greatest questions which has been submitted to the American people since we have been a nation.”

While the talks were going on, a Committee of Conferees deliberated inside the Second Universalist Church on the corner of Washington and Clinton, now the site of the Hotel Lafayette. Within the confines of these walls, delegates were pulling wires, compromises were being finalized and behind the scenes maneuvers were accomplished. In other words, politics as usual was carried on. The committee wrote a platform that was read to the crowd and met their overwhelming approval. Among its precepts were:

“We accept the issue which the Slave Power has forced upon us, and to their demand for more slave states and more slave territory, our calm, but final answer is, No more Slave States and No more Slave Territory.”

The Committee nominated former president Martin van Buren for president and Charles Francis Adams as its vice-president to a deafening acclamation from the crowd. Their banner was unfolded which said, “**Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, Free Men**”. Then in a tumultuous din, the convention “adjourned to march through the streets of Buffalo, with torches flaring and drums beating.”

The two day proceedings reminded many of a religious revival rather than a political convention. The delegates, who came from so wide and so diverse a background, were surprisingly determined and united.

The Free Soil Party did not win the presidential election but it did have some level of success, as fourteen Congressmen and two Senators were elected to Congress.

John Hubbell, *The National Free Soil Convention of '48; Held in Buffalo* (paper read before the society January 7, 1878)

The Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser*, August 8, 9, 10, 1848

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Joseph G. Rayback, *Free Soil: The Election of 1848* (1970) p. 225

Oliver Dyer's Phonographic Report of the Proceedings of the National Free Soil Convention at Buffalo, N.Y. (August 9 & 10, 1848)

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