

Number Fifteen

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1849 was an epic year. The California Gold Rush was on, Congress was debating what would become the Compromise of 1850 (which included the Fugitive Slave Law), newly elected Whig President Zachary Taylor and Vice President Millard Fillmore took office, Cincinnati was experiencing a cholera epidemic, twelve intrepid young men founded the Cincinnati Literary Club, and Harriet Beecher Stowe was gathering information for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe's novel would prove to be a profoundly influential book that would impact four presidencies: numbers thirteen (Fillmore), fourteen (Franklin Pierce), fifteen (James Buchanan), and sixteen (Abraham Lincoln). All four of these presidents, coincidentally, were all born in log cabins, and they were all lawyers.

I read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* this past summer and visited the Stowe house in Walnut Hills to learn more. Harriet, called "Hattie" from girlhood, came to Cincinnati from Connecticut with her family in 1832. Many of her relatives were scholars and preachers. Her father, Lyman Beecher, had been appointed president of Lane Theological Seminary, but had been famous prior to that for his brilliant sermons on Calvinism. Her brother, Henry Ward, gave many orations on topics including abolition and women's suffrage.

Harriet was twenty-one years old, barely five-feet tall, well-educated, and puritanically religious. She soon married widower Calvin Stowe of the Lane Seminary and proceeded to have seven children while writing whenever possible. She joined the Semi-Colon Club with her sister Catherine and such notables as Daniel Drake and Salmon P. Chase, who would later become a member of the Literary Club, a member of Lincoln's cabinet, and Chief Justice of the US Supreme

Court. (There is, incidentally, a historical marker about Chase on Third Street in downtown Cincinnati.) It was Chase who introduced Stowe to Lincoln in 1862 with his oft quoted and probably apocryphal salutation, “So you’re the little woman who started this war.”

With Semi-Colon Club, Harriet developed her writing skills and published several articles. She was also developing a keen interest in the topic of slavery and experienced it first-hand with her husband during trips to Kentucky and in discussions with freed blacks in Cincinnati. Eliza’s icy escape by crossing the Ohio River near Ripley was based on actual stories told by locals.

Still, it was not until her late thirties that she wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Life Among the Lowly*. Child rearing and poor health interrupted her endeavors. Once composed, the book was first serialized in *The National Era*, an abolitionist journal, and then published as a novel in 1852. By that time, the Stowes had moved to Brunswick, Maine, where Calvin accepted a professorship at Bowdoin College.

The book was wildly successful. It sold ten thousand copies in the first week and three hundred thousand copies in the first year. It was translated into several languages. Hattie was suddenly an international celebrity, and the Stowes could afford some niceties of life for their family, including a Florida vacation home. It was easily the most influential book of its day. There were plays, public readings, and a marked increase in abolitionist activity. The book is still in print. (I ordered a copy from a small bookstore in Anderson Township.) Fans of musical theater will recall in *The King and I*, by Rogers and Hammerstein, a play put on by the Siamese children, coached by their English governess, Anna.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin is the work of an intelligent woman who had a strong point of view regarding slavery being an intrinsic evil. While Harriet cites several

enlightened slave owners, she makes it clear that anyone who did not exert pressure against slavery was not enlightened. In style, the book does ramble a bit, and the plot development and ending bear similarities to Charles Dickens, who was actually a contemporary of Stowe's, but who wrote earlier in life, and also had a profound sense of social justice. (Dickens visited the Literary Club in the 19th century.) Harriet also used lots of semi-colons. And, although she went on to write several more books, *Uncle Tom* is only remaining success.

Ironically, abolitionists were not really in favor of integration, but preferred a sort of colonization, in which freed slaves should be returned to Africa, specifically to Liberia. Most, of course, chose not to immigrate, and Liberia became a mixed success, known now as being a flag of convenience for hundreds of ocean faring ships.

When Millard Fillmore, as Vice President, became President of the U.S. Senate in 1849, even before *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, tempers were flaring between northerners and southerners to the point where fisticuffs and threatened canings were occurring on the Senate floor. In one incident, Senator Foote from Mississippi drew a pistol on Senator Benson from Missouri. There were doubts as to whether Fillmore could handle the challenge, but he performed rather well, having had some leadership experience to draw from as former chair of the Congressional Ways and Means Committee and as comptroller in his native New York.

Fillmore was born in 1800 to sharecroppers in the Finger Lakes region. With little formal education, he tried several apprenticeships and then read and studied the law sufficiently to become a member of the bar and established a successful practice in Buffalo. He was chosen for the vice-presidential role in 1848 to balance "Old Rough and Ready" Zachary Taylor on the Whig ticket. Hero of the Mexican War and slave owner, Taylor died in 1851 after consuming cold milk and cherries

on a hot July day. Suddenly, Millard Fillmore was the thirteenth President of the United States.

By this time, the Fugitive Slaw Law was in effect. Though philosophically neutral on the topic of slavery, Fillmore saw it as his duty to enforce the law. It was a tempestuous time in the country; abolitionists were becoming increasingly inflamed by various writings and the speeches by Frederick Douglass, slave catchers roamed as far as Canada and several were tarred and feathered in Boston. U.S. Marshalls assisted in the return of runaways to their southern owners. Fillmore could satisfy neither side.

There was also another issue at the time: Nativism. The United States was a largely Protestant country with many denominations, as protected by the Constitution. The Protestant ethic prevailed in the young republic, that the measure of a man was hard work and success that were to be honored in both this life and the next. “The shining city on the hill” was reserved to those strivers who achieved success, not to, as Irma Lazarus would later write, “the huddled masses yearning to breathe free”.

Unrest in Germany had brought peasants and Anabaptists to the U.S., people with names like Eisenhower and Yuengling. (Ike’s forbearers were Mennonites. He was baptized Presbyterian as an adult.) The potato famines in Ireland brought immigrants with names like Kennedy and Reagan. The influx of Catholics alarmed many existing Americans. Some abolitionists changed their abhorrence of slavery to fear that papists would transform the country in the wrong direction. Lyman Beecher said that the Irish could never be good Americans. Yet, Catholicism was not new in the country; Lord Baltimore had established a Catholic colony in Maryland in 1729 with some of the cast-offs that the British crown was happy to be rid of. But Puritans eventually overtook that small outpost.

When the Civil War came, the immigrants proved useful as cannon fodder since they could not afford the \$300 to escape conscription (as many did, including Theodore Roosevelt's father and some abolitionists). Nativism led to the establishment of the American Party or Know Nothings, who, when arrested for attacking immigrants, claimed to know nothing of their own movement. The Know Nothings siphoned people away from Fillmore's Whig party.

The Whigs dated back to the Revolutionary War, when they supported independence in opposition to the Tories, who were loyal to King George. Whigs were predominantly middle class and supported institutions like libraries, colleges, and literary clubs. Prominent Whigs were Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and Abraham Lincoln (in his early years). Veteran Literary Club members may recall Enquirer columnist Thomas Gephardt, who wrote a monthly feature about Mr. Whig and his pursuits of good government. Whigs were vehemently opposed to Jacksonian democracy, which they termed "mobocracy". Their last hurrah was the election of Taylor and Fillmore.

Fillmore had a rough go of it. The public at large was not supportive of Fillmore's Fugitive Slave Law enforcement nor of his stance towards Nativism. He left the White House his personal library, starting the first Presidential library, but his wife and one daughter died as he was leaving office. His once successful law practice was moribund; there were no pensions, and he was a defeated man.

After an appropriate interval, he solved his problems by marrying a rich widow and settling into her copious home in Buffalo, where he became Chancellor of the University of Buffalo and engaged in other civic activities. He and his new wife traveled abroad, and Queen Victoria in England called Fillmore one of the handsomest men she ever met. The couple even had an audience with the Pope,

which is ironic because his next foray into politics was as the Presidential candidate in 1856 on the American or Know Nothing ticket, an election which he lost badly to James Buchanan.

In 1852 the country continued deeper into political turmoil, and, at the Democratic Convention, it took forty-five ballots to nominate Franklin Pierce, New Hampshire's only President. Pierce had served admirably in the Mexican War, and, although he was born in a log cabin, his family later moved into a fine house. He had a successful law practice, was a graduate of Bowdoin College, and had served in Congress. His cabinet included Jefferson Davis, a move which caused the abolitionists to label him a "doughface," a white northerner with southern sympathies. Pierce returned the insults, calling the abolitionists meddlesome and bigoted, and accused them of trying to goad the country into war. Pierce had domestic tragedies, losing a young son just prior to his inauguration. Always a liberal consumer of spirits, he retreated into frequent bouts of inebriation. Robert Frost, in a poem about New Hampshire, called him "Purse".

One of the most egregious instances of the fugitive slave law occurred late in Pierce's term when, in January of 1856, Margaret Garner fled Kentucky to Cincinnati, where her owner and U.S. Marshalls soon captured her. Garner chose in that moment to kill her baby girl rather than have her returned to slavery. (This tragedy is memorialized on the Covington floodwall and in an opera performed by the Cincinnati Opera Company.) Margaret, soon after being returned to her master, was sold down the river (much like Uncle Tom) to work on a Mississippi cotton plantation, where she later died of typhoid fever at age twenty-four.

The country limped through four years of minimal progress on both issues of slavery and nativism. It should be pointed out that the U.S. was still primarily an agrarian society in which farmers were more concerned with crop yields and the

weather than they were with happenings in Washington. Still, it was a literate society, and people voted in presidential elections at rates greater than they do today, given yet unresolved issues of women's suffrage and freed slaves voting.

So, in 1856, another "most important election in the country's history" loomed. Civil war now seemed inevitable, though sounder minds still sought ways to avoid it. The newly founded Republican Party (born in Ripon, Wisconsin in 1854) took a firm stance against allowing slavery to flow into the western territories. Their candidate, John Charles Fremont, though born in Savannah and nurtured by slaves, had spent his adult life in the west, had married the daughter of Senator Benson of Missouri, and had become anti-slavery.

Fremont's opponents in the race to become President number fifteen were James Buchanan, a Democrat from Pennsylvania and Millard Fillmore. When I was a young schoolboy growing up in the Keystone State, which was the second most populous at the time, I recall one teacher, Miss Lawson (I believe), lamenting that Pennsylvania had had only one president, and he wasn't very good. She also made reference to neighboring Ohio's eight presidents.

Quiz time: who were Ohio's eight? I will provide the answer: William Henry Harrison, Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, William McKinley, William Howard Taft, and Warren G. Harding. Ohio is tied with Virginia for the most presidents, although technically both states claim William Henry Harrison. Interestingly, neither state has had a chief executive elected in almost a full century. (Harding was the last in November of 1920.) Both Hayes and Taft were members of the Literary Club.

Buchanan, of course, was born in a log cabin in Cold Gap, Pennsylvania, near the Maryland border. He also, of course, became a lawyer after attending

Dickinson College in Carlisle. Carlisle later was also home of the Carlisle Indian College, which featured Wat-hoh-huch, better known as Jim Thorpe, on the gridiron when Carlisle College and coach Pop Warner took on and beat the best in the East, including Dwight Eisenhower and other members of the U.S. Military Academy team. The Indian College started after Buchanan was at Dickinson, as did the current United States War College. (A personal recollection of Carlisle was staying overnight in a motel and going to breakfast in a room full of bird colonels, male and female. I wonder how many made the star.)

A founding member of our Literary Club was J.D. Buchanan (no relation to the President as far as I know). James Buchanan was probably the best prepared in terms of experience of any candidate for the White House. He served in the Pennsylvania militia, the state legislature, and the U.S. House. He was appointed Minister to Russia, negotiated the first trade treaty with that country, and laid the groundwork for the eventual purchase of Alaska. Afterwards, he served in the U.S. Senate until James K. Polk appointed him Secretary of State. His most notable achievement was settling the border dispute with Britain in the Pacific Northwest, the infamous “54,40 or fight” escapade.

Having proven his negotiating skills, he was next appointed ambassador to Great Britain in 1853. While there he studied Britain’s slave history, including the decision in 1833 to outlaw the practice and to pay massive reparations to slave owners in its colonies. Buchanan certainly pondered this for potential application in the U.S., but ultimately deemed that pursuit to be futile. (Interestingly enough, it is now clear that all the slaves could have been purchased for the cost of the Civil War, but then what?) Buchanan was also advised in Britain of how crucial American cotton production was to the English textile industry. This factor alone caused some Brits to favor the south in the upcoming Civil War, but the overriding sentiment was against slavery.

In 1856, Buchanan was called home and nominated as the presidential candidate for the Democratic Party, to compete against Republican Fremont and Know Nothing Fillmore. With ample votes from the South, Buchanan won the presidency at the height of northern and southern tensions. He used his negotiating skills to appoint a cabinet with members from both regions and tried desperately to keep peace in the nation and avoid war. Never married (the only President thus), he brought his niece to Washington to act as hostess during his attempts to maintain some level of normalcy and cordiality in a badly divided nation.

The Dred Scott Supreme Court decision was rendered soon after his taking office, and some accused Buchanan of influencing the pro-southern outcome. He had earlier traveled to Virginia to buy two slave women from a relative, brought them home to Pennsylvania, and then called them indentured servants. This act was viewed as a form of subterfuge to avoid his home state's strict laws against slavery. The abolitionists made much hay of the incident, and his popularity continued to sink. Buchanan also coveted Cuba but could negotiate terms with Spain. The effort was lambasted in the North because Cuba would have been an additional slave state.

As the country inched closer to war, Buchanan chose not to be nominated again in 1860, and the election became a four-way race among Abraham Lincoln, Stephen A. Douglas, John Breckinridge, and John Bell. Lincoln received only 40% of the popular vote, but still got enough electoral college votes to win the election. Buchanan would be President for five more months, during which time South Carolina led several states to secede from the Union. His cabinet broke up and little was done to maintain federal forts and arsenals in the South, which allowed the region to prepare for war. A disheartened Buchanan told Lincoln on Inauguration Day, "You can take this job and shove it." No, not really; he is officially quoted as having said, "Sir, I hope you are as happy to enter this job as I am to leave it." He

retired to Pennsylvania to write his memoirs. Some schoolteachers seventy years later would declare him a failure.

Certainly, history has eulogized Lincoln -- more American words have been written about him than any figure except perhaps Jesus Christ but let us pause for a moment and reflect. Buchanan tried desperately to avoid war, and Lincoln presided over the bloodiest conflict in U.S. history. Was our country really a bellicose nation, predestined for contention and horrific conflict? Lincoln greatly increased the power of the central government and ballooned the national debt from sixty-four million to almost three billion. Buchanan, on the other hand, believed in the sovereignty of the states, even to the point of secession. In comparing the two using modern political terms, Buchanan was a libertarian, and Lincoln was a liberal.

This difference can perhaps be best illustrated in the Morrill Act, named for the Congressman from Vermont who proposed that the national government set aside land in each state for the establishment of public colleges that would focus on agricultural and mechanical education, thus creating land grant institutions. Buchanan vetoed the bill, insisting such measures extended beyond federal constitutional powers and that private institutions could provide ample educational resources. Lincoln, on the other hand, signed the bill into law when it came before him.

By this time, the southern states were not part of the union, so when land grant institutions were established following the Civil War, some states designated them as black colleges, i.e. Alabama A&M and Florida A&M. In the North, behemoths like Ohio State, Penn State, and Purdue resulted, as did places like Cornell and M.I.T. that eventually morphed into semi-private institutions. Land grant colleges certainly did impact agricultural efficiency and, to a degree, improved

progress in mechanical industry. Now, like with Social Security, it is difficult to imagine any American ever being opposed to the Morrill Act.

As land grant colleges were becoming entrenched in the national psyche, another interesting phenomenon occurred: the establishment of premier, private universities such as Stanford, Johns Hopkins, Chicago, Vanderbilt, and Carnegie. Most of these were funded by industrial barons and, from the outset, focused on superior academics and research. It is hard to say exactly whether this was a reaction to the land grant act, which democratized higher education, or whether industrialists simply saw the need for more research-oriented institutions to facilitate greater economic growth. In any event, the United States began its transformation from a country of farmers into an academic and medical powerhouse.

Another recent read is *The Age of Eisenhower*, in which William Hitchcock examined the presidential years rather than the war years. Ike, like Buchanan, tried desperately to avoid war after intervening in Korea. This included conflicts with the USSR (which had seemed inevitable to many) and in Southeast Asia. He was criticized by some, including John Kennedy, who was soon to initiate the events that caused the war in Vietnam. So, I will close with the previously posed question: Is the United States a bellicose nation which honors its presidents who engage in wars more than its presidents who avoid them?