

Sample Chapter -- Prologue

**Abraham Lincoln's
Convention:
*Chicago 1860***



*The First Reports -
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History Shorts / Original Voices

Prologue:

By Kenneth D. Ackerman

On May 16, 1860, with Civil War looming and the country torn by sectional hatreds over slavery, states rights, and clashing visions of the American future, the recently-formed Republican Party met in Chicago, Illinois, to choose its nominee for President. Looking back, its selection of Abraham Lincoln, a principled man uniquely qualified to lead the nation through the turmoil of disunion, war, and emancipation, seemed pre-ordained. Could it have been any other way? The country needed a special leader for a dangerous time, and one emerged. The nomination assured Lincoln's election. That November, Lincoln would face a crippled Democratic Party and win the Presidency with thirty-nine percent of the popular vote. Today, he tops almost every poll of historians and non-historians alike as the nation's single greatest and most admired president.

But Lincoln's nomination was no sure thing. In fact, almost until the minute it happened, it seemed far-fetched. Lincoln was so obscure in May 1860 that, after his selection, major newspapers misspelled his name -- Abram instead of Abraham -- and struggled to learn his background. The New-York Times, for one, described him as a "youngster who, with ragged trousers, used barefoot to drive his father's oxen and spend his days in splitting rails."

Every president is shaped by the nominating convention that chooses him to run.

Lincoln's in 1860 not only was one of the most important, but also the most exciting ever in America up to that point. In a three day, three-ballot carnival of music, fireworks, and politics drawing some 40,000 people, it saw Lincoln and his friends outwit the leading celebrities of their party, capturing the prize with nerve, ambition, and brass tacks. They played the kind of hardball politics that usually made reformers cringe. Still, it gave us the best candidate anyone could have hoped for to save the country.

How? By all appearances, the Republican presidential nomination in 1860 had been locked up in advance by another candidate: William Seward, New York's distinguished U.S. Senator and former governor, backed by New York money, eastern abolitionists, and veteran political fixer Thurlow Weed, publisher of the influential Albany Evening Journal. Seward had launched a coordinated, well-funded national campaign. His managers in Chicago charmed delegates with champagne and oysters as their army of noisy boosters and clackers – imported by the trainload from New York's rowdy neighborhoods -- paraded through Chicago behind brass bands and colorful banners. Seward's committed delegates on the convention floor outnumbered those of every other candidate, though not quite an outright majority.

Should Seward stumble, a line of major figures stood ready to collect the prize: Ohio's Governor and former U.S. Senator Salmon P. Chase, Pennsylvania's Senator Simon Cameron, Missouri's Edward Bates, among others. Each had his own block of delegates, a national reputation, and plenty of friends.

Abraham Lincoln, by contrast, was a relative unknown. At 51 years old, he had held national office only once, serving a single term in the U.S. Congress in the late 1840s. He'd left his seat in 1848 after speaking out against the popular Mexican War. He'd twice failed to win an

Illinois seat in the U.S. Senate. His 1858 debates with Democrat Stephen A. Douglas had won him national attention and a majority of the popular votes, but the Democratic-controlled state legislature that year still gave the seat to Douglas. (Prior to 1913, when the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, U.S. Senators were chosen by state legislatures rather than by voters.) A self-educated lawyer, Lincoln had never managed a large company, never run a government agency, and had few backers outside his home state. An engaging public speaker, he suffered bouts of melancholy, stood awkwardly tall, and had a homely appearance. “If I had two faces,” he once joked, “do you think this is the one I’d be wearing?”

In the end, “Honest Abe” and his operators captured the nomination by a host of tricks that made peoples’ heads spin. Among other things, they pushed Republicans to hold their convention in Chicago, far from East Coast pressures, where they could use their local advantage to manipulate convention arrangements and pack the hall with Lincoln men. They forced a “unit rule” on Illinois’s own twenty-two delegates, a tactic future Republican conventions would outlaw as an undemocratic tool for Bosses. They recast Lincoln’s image from sharp railroad lawyer to folksy “rail splitter,” though Lincoln hadn’t done physical labor in decades. They cut deals for votes and launched whispering campaigns against rival candidates, calling them unelectable or worse.

Issues

Passions over of slavery and states rights had reached a boiling point in early 1860. The Missouri Compromise, which had papered over differences since 1820 by limiting slavery to Southern states, had unraveled in 1854 with passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act that suddenly permitted slavery into the free western territories. Then, in 1856, the Supreme Court upheld the

Fugitive Slave law in its Dred Scott v. Sandford decision, making slavery legal nationwide. The issue erupted in open violence in “Bloody Kansas,” followed by John Brown’s 1859 raid on Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. President James Buchanan sat helplessly in the White House, unable or unwilling to staunch the crisis.

Most white Northerners abhorred slavery, despite personal prejudices against African Americans. They saw Southerners as bold and arrogant, dominating the economy with their huge plantations that inevitably threatened free farmers and factory workers up north. William H. Seward in 1858, as a United States Senator, predicted an “irrepressible conflict” between North and South. Lincoln too warned that the nation could not survive half slave, half free. Northerners and Southerners alike saw 1860 as a watershed. The choice of a next president would tip the balance, making the country unlivable for one side or the other.

By the time Republicans gathered in Chicago to pick a candidate, they had already seen the Democratic Party disintegrate over the issue. Democrats had met in Charleston, South Carolina, in late April but had disbanded their convention after 57 ballots without a nominee. Illinois U.S. Senator Stephen A. Douglas -- a champion of letting settlers decide for themselves whether to allow slavery through what he called “popular sovereignty” -- far outpolled his more dogmatic rivals, but he failed to satisfy the Party’s rule requiring a two-thirds majority for nominees, a device designed to give slave states a veto. Delegates from seven southern states had stormed out after failing to break the impasse. Later that summer, the Democratic Party would split in two. Northerners, meeting in Baltimore, would nominate Douglas. Southerners would meet in Richmond, Virginia, future capitol of the Confederacy, and chose Kentuckian John Breckenridge, the country’s sitting Vice President and a pro-slavery Southerner.

This split among Democrats had already spawned the creation of yet another new political force, the Constitutional Union Party. Shunning both Democrats and Republicans alike as sectional zealots, it met in Baltimore on May 9 to choose its own separate candidate for president, Tennessee U.S. Senator John Bell. Bell, a former Speaker of the House who owned 166 slaves, saw himself as a unifying force who could bridge North and South and avoid Civil War. To demonstrate his commitment to national harmony, he chose as his vice presidential running mate the prominent Massachusetts orator and former U.S. Senator Edward Everett – who later would give the main speech before Lincoln’s own famous 1863 Gettysburg Address.

Chicago

As a result, Republicans, their Party just five years old, suddenly found themselves in a surprising position. As they gathered in Chicago in May 1860, filled its hotels and enjoyed the excitement, the delegates and politicians all recognized that whoever they chose as a candidate – unless they chose badly – could probably win the White House.

Following tradition, the candidates themselves stayed away -- Lincoln in Springfield and Seward in upstate New York -- as their “friends” set up shop in hotels around the convention hall to plead their cases. Nine slave states decided to boycott the convention (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, or the Carolinas).

All the delegates who came to Chicago were chosen by state and/or local party meetings - - conventions and caucuses. Many were hand picked by local strongmen. *Primary elections giving voters a voice in party nominations would not exist until the Twentieth Century.* Practical politicians would make the choice, plying their craft on the loftiest stage of the era, their party’s national convention.

Chicago itself in 1860 was a rugged frontier town of 100,000 on the banks of Lake Michigan, the fastest growing city in America. Visitors saw it as a place of contrasts, glaring wealth and poverty, luxury homes and mud streets, theaters and brothels. Growing rich from railroads and factories, the city sported forty large hotels, thousands of smokestacks, and a dozen baseball teams.

For the Republican Convention, Chicago built what was then the largest indoor arena in America. The “Wigwam,” named for the large tents often erected for religious camp meetings, would hold twelve thousand people. It had space for 466 delegates on its wide stage, a standing area (no chairs) for spectators, and an upstairs gallery for ladies with escorts. Its twenty-foot doors could open and allow thousands more to peer in from outside on nearby Lake and Market streets. The stage itself was lit by gas lamps and decked with evergreen wreaths and large oil painted figures representing Agriculture, Justice, Liberty, Mechanics and the Arts. Busts of prominent statesmen dotted the room along with coats of arms of the different States.

Some 40,000 strangers would invade Chicago for what would be the largest political gathering ever yet held in America. To greet them, the city lined its streets in red, white, and blue bunting, posted flags and banners, and provided fire works, booming cannons, and marching brass bands. Railroads provided special trains for delegates traveling from New York and other east coast cities, with crowds and marching bands to greet them at stops along the way. It would be a grand old time, no matter what.

The Newspapers

In this *History Short*, we tell the story of Lincoln’s nominating convention primarily through the eyes of newspaper writers – giving it the immediacy and excitement of the moment.

Newspapers dominated the American media in 1860 and they covered politics intensely. Cutting edge technologies were changing the face of news at that point: the telegraph, which allowed stories to flash across the country almost instantly from the touch of an operator's key; huge steam presses that could produce tens of thousands of copies in a few hours; and type-setting machines that allowed quick assembly of multiple daily editions. Lincoln's convention in 1860 would be the first with telegraph instruments wired to transmit news directly from the convention floor. The Chicago Wigwam itself made room for at least sixty reporters to cover the story from the scene.

The *New York Herald* and *New York Sun* had the biggest circulations in 1860, selling 77,000 and 60,000 copies each day, respectively. But the closest to being a truly national platform was the *New York Tribune*, still operating under its founding publisher and editor, Horace Greeley. In addition to its 55,000 daily circulation in 1860, the *Tribune* also produced a weekly edition with over 100,000 copies mailed across the country and passed hand to hand or shared by friends in small towns. Its actual readership was estimated at half a million. Frontier Illinois alone received 10,000 copies each week, making Greeley perhaps the best-known "pundit" of the era.

Greeley would play a uniquely large role in shaping American journalism in the 1800s. Eccentric, talkative, disheveled, with an unmistakable wispy beard, he would take credit for training an entire generation of editors, writers, and craftsman at the *Tribune* who would lead American newspapers for the next thirty years: Charles Dana at the *New York Sun*, Henry Raymond and George Jones at *The New-York Times*, Whitelaw Reid at the *Tribune*, George W. Curtis at *Harper's Weekly*, among others.

Most newspapers in 1860 were owned, controlled by, or allied with political parties.

Independence was rare, and newsmen saw no conflict in openly taking sides. Both Greeley and Henry Raymond, publisher of *The New-York Times*, sat as delegates at Lincoln's 1860 nominating convention. Greeley had been a member of Congress in the 1840s. Raymond had been New York Lieutenant Governor and speaker of the state assembly, and would be elected to Congress in 1865. Thurlow Weed, the acknowledged leader of the Seward campaign, published the *Albany Evening Journal*, and Lincoln backer Joseph Medill ran the *Chicago Tribune*.

Here, too, Greeley had been the trail-blazer, having helped conceive the "Tippicanoe and Tyler Too" campaign for Whig nominee William Henry Harrison in 1840 and made his *New York Tribune* a campaign headquarters for Republican John Fremont in 1856. In 1872, Greeley would run for president himself, winning the nominations of both the Democratic and the Liberal Republican parties, though losing in a landslide to the incumbent, Ulysses S. Grant.

In 1860, Greeley came to Chicago with the singular purpose of wanting to stop William Seward from winning the nomination. Greeley had once been close friends with Seward, a fellow New York progressive, but they had broken years earlier in argument over a patronage job. Now, ostracized by New York's pro-Seward delegation, Greeley attended the Convention as a carpetbag delegate from Oregon and campaigned loudly for Missouri's Edward Bates.

In this *History Short*, we use the daily reporting of Greeley's *New York Tribune* as the main source for coverage of the convention's daily proceedings – just as did the half million daily and weekly readers of the *Tribune* at the time. By-lines were rare in 1860s newspapers, so many of the fine journalists behind the columns remain anonymous.

For commentary, we turn to one of the most flamboyant newsmen of the era, Joe Howard Jr. of *The New-York Times*. Born in Brooklyn in 1833, graduate of the Troy Polytechnic Institute

(today's RPI), Howard gave up a career in civil engineering to join the Times in early 1860 to cover a shoemakers strike in Lynn, Massachusetts. His dogged reporting sometimes crossed the ethical line even by Nineteenth Century standards. During the Civil War, he covered dozens of battles from Bull Run to Balls Bluff, but was also caught violating military orders by sneaking into the funeral of General Philip Kearney – killed in action at the Second Battle of Manassas/Bull Run -- to snoop on celebrities.

Most notoriously, Howard was prosecuted in May 1864 and spent fourteen weeks in a military prison for producing a fake story claiming that President Lincoln planned to draft some 400,000 additional soldiers to bolster General Grant's army in Virginia. The episode came just a few months after the New York City draft riots and terrified many New Yorkers. Howard later admitted that he had designed the story to aid certain Wall Street speculators placing bets on the New York Gold Exchange.

Still, Howard's reporting on the 1860 presidential race was first rate, earning him a national following and a rare by-line. After the war, Howard would become one of the best known writers in America, long-time president of the New York Press Club, and author of a syndicated column in addition to editing the *Brooklyn Eagle* and other local papers.

Finally, for context, we include a smattering of eye-witness accounts, letters, interviews and memoir excerpts from key players. For ease of reading, we have made minor edits, added annotations and background, and updated formatting. Otherwise, we have left the original text alone. We hope you enjoy it, a good story told well by talented people who saw it with their own eyes.

We give special thanks for help in preparing this *History Short* to the staff at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., a true national treasure that gave us easy access to all original

material. Unless otherwise noted, they are the source of everything you see here. Thanks also to my friends and colleagues Steve Terman and David O. Stewart for feedback on the concept, Linette Abraham Vann for help in preparing the manuscript, and Paula Reichwald of Igossi.Com for designing the cover and converting the book into digital form.

The full official proceedings of the 1860 Republican Convention are available online at the University of California Digital Library,

<http://archive.org/details/proceedingsofrep00repuiala>