

# POLITICAL

IN CELEBRATION OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES MONTH

# ECHOES

FROM THE SHELDON MUSEUM ARCHIVES

## THE (UN)SETTLED QUESTION

An editorial in the Oct. 31, 1860, issue of the *Middlebury Register* reads: "It has been asserted by Southern presses that Vermont is a bagatelle, and might as well be out of the Union as in it. ...[N]ext Tuesday...let them be assured that she is in the Union, and that...she will speak for freedom in tones not to be misunderstood." The editorial referred to the 1860 presidential election, and regarded Abraham Lincoln, one of four candidates running, as the best choice for the nation in crisis.

On Nov. 6, 1860, Vermont voters joined most American white male voters in electing Lincoln as the 16th president of the United States. His election triggered the secession of 11 southern states from the Union, which in turn precipitated the Civil War. For most northerners and southerners, Lincoln's election settled the key question on slavery: northern Republicans believed Lincoln would prohibit slavery in the territories, while southern Democrats viewed slavery

in the territories as a constitutional right but also feared that Lincoln would abolish their sacred institution altogether. The color lithograph "The Question Settled," one piece of political ephemera among many archived at the Sheldon Research Center, offers a visual representation of the consequences of the 1860 election. E. B. & E. C. Kellogg of Hartford, Conn., produced the lithograph circa 1862. It depicts a defiant white cat wearing a red, white and blue ribbon collar with an American pendant and bearing the name "Old Abe." The white cat glowers at a gray cat, whose ominous noose-like collar reads "Jeff," for Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy. As "Jeff" slinks angrily out of the dish, a black cat, wearing a ribbon displaying the word "Contraband," paws at the dish behind Old Abe. The lithograph provides a snapshot of the current state of the nation at that time: secession, disunion and the Union Army's confiscation of the enslaved, branded "contraband."

Throughout the summer and fall of 1860, local Vermont newspapers ran stories and editorials about the candidates and their respective political parties that sought to sway public opinion. Readers today can glean these newspapers preserved at the Sheldon archives, many of which are also accessible in digital format through the Library of Congress's "Chronicling America" website.

Only at the Chicago Republican Convention in May 1860 did Lincoln emerge as the Republican Party nominee for president. On the first ballot, all 10 of Vermont's delegates cast their votes for Vermont Senator Jacob Collamer, the only votes he received. Once Collamer withdrew from the race, the Vermont delegates shifted their votes to "Honest Old Abe" for president and Maine Senator Hannibal "Gallant" Hamlin, his running mate. The May 23, 1860, issue of the *Register* characterized the six-foot, four-inch "wiry and gaunt" Lincoln as one of

*Currently we live in one of the most politically divisive times in American history. However, the past is full of politically charged moments that still resonate with us today as documented by the Sheldon Museum's archival collections.*



the people — "the pioneer...the farmer...the flat boatman" — who would not "commence anew the agitation of the Slavery question." Lincoln vowed to leave slavery alone where it existed but oppose its expansion to the territories.

A month earlier, local newspapers had tagged Stephen A. Douglas, the Illinois Senator and native son of Brandon, Vt., who as a young man during the late 1820s apprenticed under the Middlebury cabinet maker, Nahum Parker, the Democratic Party front runner. The *Middlebury Register* describes the short, stocky Douglas as intellectually "robust and unpolished," who opposed Congressional restrictions on slavery in the territories. Most Vermont Republicans wanted the western territories free of slavery and thus available to "free soil" wage-earning white men. This matter energized young white male voters, who called themselves "Wide Awakes," a loose-knit, extra-legal fraternal regulator club movement. Wearing oil-cloth capes and glazed caps, its members paraded with torches and oil lanterns at Republican rallies, where with military precision, they escorted Republican politicians — just as hundreds of Wide Awakes did in Plattsburgh, New York, on Sept. 18, 1860.

On Nov. 6, 1860, Vermonters cast their votes to let the nation know that Vermont stood "for freedom." On Nov. 3, 2020, Vermonters will have the opportunity to let the nation know that it continues to speak for freedom in tones not to be misunderstood.

*Contributed by William B. Hart, Professor Emeritus of History, Middlebury College, and former Trustee of the Henry Sheldon Museum.*