

Abraham Lincoln and the Political Pole

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Before electronic and social media, even before widespread print media and photographs American political campaigns were wild with color and excitement that doesn't always come through in the history books. One of the most exuberant campaign promotions was the raising of political poles, giant structures raised to proclaim a candidate or a party during a raucous campaign rally and street party. The tradition grew out of the liberty poles erected before the Revolution to protest British taxes on Americans.

In Springfield, Illinois, in the 1844 election the practice took on a new fervor in a competition between the Democratic and Whig parties. In July the supporters of James K. Polk, the Democratic candidate for president, raised a hickory pole paying tribute to "Old Hickory" Andrew Jackson. The wooden pole topped with a flag towered above Illinois' capitol city, then a small town of mud streets with roaming livestock, a modest capitol building and small frame houses with gardens and stables in the back. A well near the pole was accidentally contaminated. After some residents became ill rumors started that the Democrats poisoned the well. The Whigs quickly disavowed the attack and the illnesses ran their course.

On August 3 a crowd of about five to six thousand gathered downtown to raise the Whig's pole. Among those in the crowd was Abraham Lincoln, a young lawyer and former state legislator who was a strong supporter of the Whig party. The pole was made of ash in honor of Whig presidential candidate Henry Clay who named his Kentucky estate Ashland. The pole, which was in reality an octagon tower built by hand, weighed 11 tons. When pulled up into its 12 foot deep foundation the pole would rise 210 feet above the ground. By comparison the tallest structure in America in 1844 was the Park Street Chapel in Boston which reached 217 feet. A flag and a 150 foot long streamer with the word "Union" topped the pole.

To raise the pole the Whigs had built an 80 foot high derrick, which by itself was an impressive structure. A number

of guy ropes were attached to the derrick to raise the pole. The builders had been experiencing some difficulties with the ropes. John Brodie, a stone mason who immigrated from Scotland, and his 18 year old assistant William Connant climbed up the derrick to adjust the ropes. With no warning the derrick collapsed and fell over. Brodie clung to his platform and rode the structure down to a tremendous crash as the crowd shouted in horror. Brodie was killed instantly, his body reduced to, as one observer later wrote, "a shapeless corpse." Connant first tried to climb down and then jumped from the falling derrick from about 60 feet. He slammed into the ground, actually driving some of his broken bones into the soil. Connant was taken to a doctor with little expectation of recovery.

The raw nerves of the horrified spectators fueled the rumors that the Democrats had tampered with the ropes. Again the Whigs repudiated the suspicions. Both political parties passed resolutions honoring Brodie and pledging to help Connant. Lincoln participated in drafting the resolution for Brodie who had been one of his clients in an estate case. The Whigs paid for Brodie's tombstone which included the inscription "Far from his native land he lies, Wrapped in the vestments of the grave."

On August 24 the pole was successfully raised, leading to a day of celebrations, speeches and fireworks. Lincoln often visited Connant who defying predictions slowly recovered. In October Lincoln took Connant in a wagon to a Whig rally in nearby Jacksonville, Illinois.

In November, after the Whigs lost the election, the pole was carefully lowered. The long banner was presented to Connant who never fully recovered from his injuries but was able to find a successful career in the furniture business. Lincoln and others in the crowd had witnessed one death among the hundreds of thousands to come in the next two decades in a nation deeply and violently divided over political questions. What once drove Americans to try to outdo each by other raising poles turned into a bloody civil war.