

## **Lewisburg's Presidential Connection**

**by**

**Stanley Zellers**

For a small town in central Pennsylvania, Lewisburg has had her fair share of notables – men who took their place on the national stage - men like Eli Slifer, who served as Secretary of the Commonwealth during the Civil War, or Tasker Bliss, Black Jack Pershing's Chief of Staff during World War I. But a man with ties to Lewisburg nominated for the presidency of the United States? It's true, and it's part of what I consider to be one of the more fascinating stories of the Civil War era.

Up until the mid 1850s the Whigs and the Democrats had played loyal opposition to each other. But now, spawned by the seething cauldron of anti-slavery sentiment that held tightly to so many in the North, a new political force called the Republican Party had been born. The first national convention of this new party convened in Chicago in May 1860 at a place called the Wigwam, built especially for the event. The front-runner, the man most thought to be a shoo-in, was Senator William Seward of New York.

The process of nominating a presidential candidate today is sterile and anticlimactic in comparison to what it was in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Today's extended primary season, with its never-ending news coverage, polls du jour, and managed men and messages is a pale likeness of the process back then. The nominating convention was THE main event, full of high drama (and hi-jinks), smoke-filled (literally) back room dealings, and intrigues of all kinds. For anyone who might feel put off by today's political antics I suggest reading the history of the Chicago Republican convention of May 1860.

Out of the yeasty atmosphere in Chicago would, of course, come the Republican Party's first nominee and first President – Abraham Lincoln.

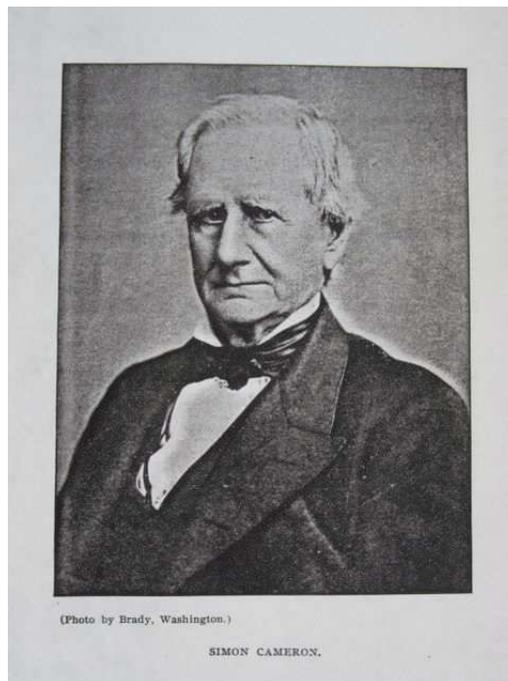
Today's process awards delegates to candidates on a state by state basis as the candidates make their way through each state's primary. By the time the convention arrives, the nominee is generally a foregone conclusion. The conventions seem more of an opportunity for each party to rally their base, introduce rising stars, and generally put

forth the message they hope will get their candidate elected. In the usual case the naming of the candidate is almost an afterthought – certainly not the highlight of the event in my estimation.

Not so in Chicago in May 1860.

In spite of Seward's perceived inevitability, there were Lincoln operatives who saw the chinks in Seward's political armor. Four states – New Jersey, Illinois, Indiana, and Pennsylvania – were thought to be still up in the air. If Lincoln could secure the delegates from three of those states, he would overcome Seward's early lead and secure the nomination. The Lincoln men went to work on each delegation.

The head of the Pennsylvania delegation was Simon Cameron. Cameron's biographical information reveals a man of intense ambition. By the time of the 1860 convention he had already served as president of two railroad companies, owned and edited a newspaper, served as adjutant general of Pennsylvania, and been elected to the United States Senate twice.



Simon Cameron, photo by Matthew Brady, courtesy of Betty Cook.

In an era when ambitious men had only to reach for the brass ring, Cameron's drive and desire for power placed him on par with other, equally driven men – Charles Sumner, Salmon P Chase, William Seward, Judson Kilpatrick, and Dan Sickles, to name

a few. Cameron's grip on the Pennsylvania delegation placed power in the hands of a man who knew how to wield it. On the morning of May 18, just before the convention was to be called to order and the voting of delegates to begin, Cameron sent an emissary to the Lincoln men. He (Cameron) would swing the Pennsylvania delegation into the Lincoln column provided two conditions were met: 1) he would be named Secretary of the Treasury in Lincoln's cabinet, and 2) he would be given absolute power to dispense political patronage in the Commonwealth.

This was too much for Lincoln's agents to swallow. They immediately telegraphed Lincoln (in the custom of the day, candidates did not attend the convention) seeking counsel. Back came the reply "I authorize no bargains and will be bound by none."

At this point the history becomes a bit fuzzy. Some claim a deal was struck with Cameron, others, after years of research, determined to the contrary. Regardless, what is known is that the Pennsylvania delegation DID eventually vote for Lincoln, and that Cameron was appointed Secretary of War, not Secretary of the Treasury. So far as the issue of patronage goes, Andrew Curtin, who was at the time a rising star in Pennsylvania politics and who would be a stalwart Lincoln ally throughout the war, apparently found a way to blunt Cameron's demand.

Whether Cameron's demands were acquiesced to, hemmed and hawed around, or just plain rejected, there remained one final bit of theater that Cameron's ego had to have. By prior agreement with Lincoln's operatives, the first round of nominees on the morning of May 18 dutifully included Simon Cameron from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for President of the United States. Of course this was a ceremonial gesture, and Cameron had no chance of actually receiving the nomination, but he was that powerful a figure. He had coerced from those who needed the push he would provide this one last ounce of satisfaction. He garnered 50½ votes on the first ballot. On the second ballot, the Pennsylvania delegation swung into Lincoln's column, and history was set on the path we know.

Cameron's tenure as Secretary of War lasted roughly a year. Many see him as corrupt. He himself was quoted as saying "An honest politician is one who, when he is bought, will stay bought." Thaddeus Stevens, congressman from Pennsylvania, when discussing Cameron's honesty with Lincoln, told Lincoln "I don't think that he would steal a red hot stove". When Cameron demanded Stevens retract this statement, Stevens

told Lincoln "I believe I told you he would not steal a red-hot stove. I will now take that back."

Instead of corruption, Cameron may have simply been overwhelmed. Putting a country on war footing overnight would take a superhuman effort. Those who point to his shortcomings may want to consider the enormous challenges he faced in the early days of the war.

Love him or hate him, he is a part of history – one of the men who helped Abraham Lincoln achieve his paramount objective – to preserve the Union. And, as we know, he does have ties to Lewisburg.

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