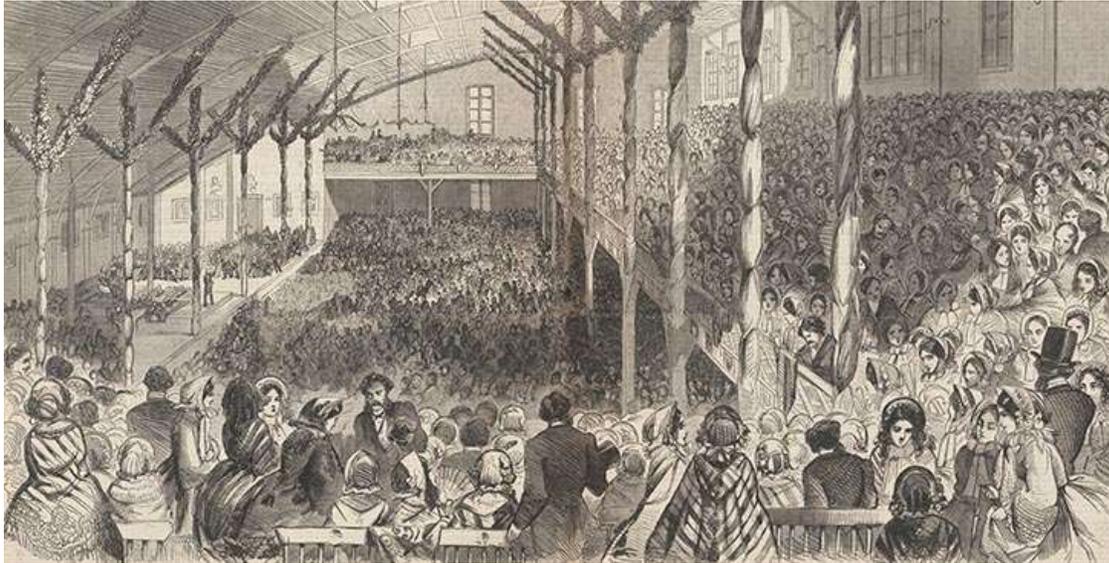


Bloomingtonians played pivotal role in Lincoln's 1860 nomination



This woodcut appeared in Harper's Weekly a day after the end of the Chicago convention. Nearly 12,000 attendees packed into the "Wigwam," as the temporary, barn-like hall was known, to witness Lincoln's nomination on May 18.

One hundred and fifty years ago this Tuesday, Abraham Lincoln received the Republican Party's nomination for president. Lincoln partly owes his May 18, 1860 victory at the national convention to the intense lobbying—and some likely backroom politicking—of Judge David Davis of Bloomington.

The Judge (as he was known), who served as Lincoln's political manager during the Chicago confab, also relied on the expert arm-twisting of fellow Bloomingtonian Leonard Swett.

So for those downstate residents who habitually complain about the shady political climate of the big city to the north, let it be said that way back in 1860, two local residents wrote the book on how to play and win politics the "Chicago Way."

Both men were intimates of Lincoln, Davis as judge of the Eighth Judicial Circuit, where Lincoln practiced law, and Swett as an accomplished Bloomington lawyer. The two were also key movers and shakers in the state Republican Party, formed just four years earlier to halt the spread of slavery into free territories.

In Chicago, Davis served as manager and had at his disposal a number of Eighth Circuit lawyers, including Ward Hill Lamon of Bloomington, as well as friends of Lincoln, such as Town of Normal founder Jesse Fell.

Although a dark horse, Lincoln's odds against frontrunner William Seward, a U.S. senator from New York, were better than first supposed by the pols and pundits of the

day. For one, moderate and conservative Republicans were wary of nominating Seward, a candidate perceived as too radical, especially when it came to his antagonistic rhetoric toward the South.

The nomination rested with the key swing states of Illinois, Indiana, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and all four delegations were inclined to back a more moderate candidate, such as Lincoln.

On the night of May 15, just before the start of the convention, the Indiana delegation pledged its support Illinois' favorite son. When Lincoln became president, he appointed Hoosier Caleb B. Smith secretary of the patronage- and contract-rich Interior Department. Since that selection, there's been vigorous debate as to whether there was a quid pro quo arrangement.

For their part, both Davis and Swett denied doling out cabinet positions in order to secure support from state delegations. "No pledges have been made, no mortgages executed," Swett wrote a little more than a week after the convention.

Yet there's enough contradictory evidence to call into question such assertions. Lincoln biographer Michael Burlingame splits the difference, concluding that while Davis promised Indiana a cabinet appointment, he did not necessarily guarantee the seat would go to Smith.

During the convention Lincoln, who remained in Springfield monitoring the unfolding events via telegraph, sent a message meant for Davis et al. reading: "Make no contracts that will bind me." If an account by Urbana attorney Henry C. Whitney is to be believed, Davis supposedly responded by saying, "Lincoln ain't here, and don't know what we have to meet, so we will go ahead, as if we hadn't heard from him."

And much like Indiana, debate has long swirled over whether Davis promised a cabinet seat to Pennsylvania Sen. Simon Cameron in exchange for his state's pledge to back Lincoln (Cameron, by the way, would serve as Lincoln's first secretary of war).

Lincoln's team recruited thousands of supporters from nearby states to serve as foot soldiers in and around the temporary convention hall known as the Wigwam. "After the first days we were aided by the arrival of at least 10,000 people from Central Illinois and Indiana," Swett wrote a little more than a week after the nomination. And according to Burlingame, Indiana's Republican state chairman ordered the printing of 5,000 counterfeit convention tickets (legitimate ones were hard to come by), and then handed them out to the raucous (and goodly liquored up) Lincoln boosters.

Davis' strategy worked beautifully. Lincoln received a better-and-expected 102 votes on the first ballot, compared to Seward's 173.5. On the second go-around, Pennsylvania threw 48 of its 54 votes to the "Rail Splitter" (a nickname coined just a week earlier), and his total increased to 181, while Seward picked up only 11 additional votes. It was clear

delegates were now flocking to Lincoln, and with such overwhelming momentum, the Illinoisan secured the nomination before the end of third-round balloting.

Sarah Davis, the Judge's wife, penned a letter to their son George Perrin on May 31, two weeks after the convention. "I trust you will never be a politician, as a quiet and peaceable life seems to me very desirable," she wrote. "Life seems too valuable to be wasted in the turmoil of politics."

In 1862, thanks in no small measure to Swett's persistent pleading, President Lincoln nominated Davis for the U.S. Supreme Court, and there he remained for 14 years before moving to the U.S. Senate.