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Minnesota History Vignettes - John C. Fremont

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Minnesota's Role in the First Republican Nominee for President

Our United States faces one of its most critical presidential elections on November 6, but did you know Minnesota played a role in another important presidential election in our nation's history?

First test your knowledge on some trivia related to that historic election. Who was the first Republican to be nominated for president of the United States and what was his connection to Minnesota?

Abraham Lincoln is the most common guess as the first presidential nominee for the Republican Party, but in fact it was John C. Fremont in 1856. Prior to 1856 the 2 dominant parties were the Democrats and the Whigs. The Whig party was actually named after the British opposition party during the Revolutionary war that opposed the policies and the tactics of the British Crown that brought the revolution about. In the early 1850s the Whig party was crumbling in the midst of a major debate over slavery.

In 1850 many Whig politicians devised a compromise that was intended to settle the slavery debate, but it only caused the debate to reach seismic proportions. Part of that compromise was the extremely unpopular provision in the North known as the "fugitive slave act" that allowed Southern bounty hunters to track down fugitive slaves in free northern states. Then in 1854 Democratic leaders passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act that allowed southern interests an opportunity to turn Kansas to a slave state. This led to the tragic episode known as "Bleeding Kansas" with open bloody terroristic conflicts exploding on the prairie as pro- and anti-slavery advocates began flooding the state.

Following the Kansas-Nebraska Act northern Whigs and others started openly advocating for a new political party. It was on March 20, 1854 in a schoolhouse in Ripon, Wisconsin that this new movement first received the name of the "Republican Party". The new party's selection of Fremont as their first national standard-bearer seemed to be inspired. By the mid-1850s he was one of the most popular and well-known individuals in the country due to his exploits as a trailblazer in the western territories. Most of the routes through the Rocky Mountains south of the Oregon Trail were discovered and mapped by expeditions led by Fremont. Books extolling his exploits in the savage wilds of the West with his trusted assistant mountain man Kit Carson were devoured by the public in that age of western expansion.

Fremont's connection to Minnesota was significant in that he first learned his trailblazing skills here. His first military commission was to explore and map the Minnesota Territory in the 1830s with Joseph Nicollet. It was on this mapping expedition that Fremont distinguished himself and carefully learned wilderness exploration skills. Minnesota launched his career leading to the future exploration commissions that would make him famous.

Fremont went on to lose the 1856 presidential election, but his strong performance leading the fledgling party in its inaugural national election made it clear to southerners that the political winds were changing. Fremont's loss was due more to the fact that it was a three-way race with the dying Whig party still having a candidate on the ballot in former president Millard Fillmore. This took several critical votes in the North from the new party. Also, the eventual winner, Democrat James Buchanan, was from Pennsylvania. In the North Fremont won the popular vote with 45.2% to Buchanan's 41.5% and Fillmore's 13.3%. Amazingly, in the South Fremont did not receive a single vote in 10 of the 14 slave states and only received 600 in the other four states. Republicans carried 11 of the 17 northern non-slave states. Had Fremont carried Buchanan's home state of Pennsylvania and one other northern state he would have won enough electoral votes.

The Republican Party leaders came to the conclusion after the 1856 election that Fremont was probably more strident anti-slavery than even the northern states could tolerate. Therefore, they sought a more moderate candidate on the issue for their next presidential election, settling on Abraham Lincoln. It helped that Lincoln also came from one of the key states they did not win in 1856 in Illinois. That selection brought Republicans to victory, but did not appease the pro-slavery southern states. The

result was the Civil War.

To learn more on the amazing life of John C. Fremont read the book *Fremont, Explore for a Restless Nation* by Ferol Egan, University of Nevada Press, 1985, reprinting as originally published by Doubleday, 1977.

An excellent read on Minnesota's early history is *The Journals of Joseph N. Nicollet*. It can be purchased through the [Minnesota Historical Society](#). You can also find a reprint of the [famous map](#) that resulted from the Nicollet/Fremont expeditions at the Historical Society Store.

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