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LINCOLN AND THE START OF THE CIVIL WAR



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In virtually every aspect of Abraham Lincoln's career, the two major Cape Cod papers of the time chose opposite sides. The Yarmouth Register, staunchly Republican, supported Lincoln throughout his career. The Register had been solidly Whig until the Whig Party evolved into what would be known as the Republican Party, just as Lincoln had done. The Barnstable Patriot, just as staunchly Democratic as the Yarmouth Register was Republican, hated all things Whig or Republican. Throughout the presidential election of 1860, the Patriot and the Register sparred viciously with each other. Even after the election, the Patriot continued to complain about Lincoln. After his election and before he was inaugurated, the country was in turmoil.

Starting in early February of 1861, states started seceding from the Union. The Barnstable Patriot reported on these states, "With slow but sure steps, without passion, calmly, determinedly, six states have left the Union and formed a new Confederacy. It is of no use to deny the right of secession, and equally of no use to cry that there is no danger, and that the Union will be preserved. States have seceded and the Union is dissolved." In the very next column to this announcement of the formation of the Southern Republic appeared information on how to deal with carbuncles and boils. Old time newspapers had to set their own lead type, and once in place it wasn't changed. In its very next issue, editor Charles Swift of the Register took umbrage at the Patriot's position. He quoted from the Patriot on February 15th, and then editorialized, "The above, from the last Patriot, strikes us as a rather cool recognition of treason, for a paper that professes to be, par excellence, the Union journal of the county.

The tone of the paragraph is one of scarcely concealed exultation, rather than of grief." The war of words continued between the two papers until Abraham Lincoln informed the south that he would resupply Fort Sumter, a federal fort in Charleston, South Carolina harbor. South Carolina, one of the seceding states, vowed not to let this happen, and on April 12th commenced the actual war with a bombard of Sumter. Both papers were horrified. The Democratic leaning Patriot published the news first, as it was printed three days before the Register. "Fort Sumter in Ruins... War Excitement Everywhere... The peace society is not a favorite hobby in Massachusetts. The red hand of war is pleasanter.... The seed sown has sprouted, trees have grown and are now covered with blossoms. The anti-slavery society has flowered. We are in the midst of civil war. Fraternal blood has flowed."

The Register took the Patriot's words as unpatriotic. It responded directly on April 19th' "the Patriot, we are sorry to see, does not emulate the spirit that seems to animate the greater portion of its Democratic contemporaries. The partisan altogether predominates over the patriot in its leading editorial, and its sympathies appear to be altogether on the side of the rebels who are lifting their bloody hands to destroy the Union of American States."

This editorial was a slap in the face to the Patriot and for the next several issues it printed a flag on each page. The Patriot wrote, "OUR COUNTRY'S FLAG—We have displayed the flag of our country on our printing office ... and today in the Patriot, we fling out the same flag, not a star or stripe erased ... In this matter, we but follow our convictions—The Union, it Must Be Preserved...Our reading of the Constitution and the laws is the same. But as war exists, we shall be found on the side of our country, its rulers and laws.... Now that the war has commenced let it be prosecuted vigorously. We were in favor of conciliation and compromise, but the dogs of war are let loose and the labors of peace must cease." And with these words, the Patriot became part of the "war" Democrats, rather than the "peace" Democrats. One branch of the Democratic Party was so anti-war that those members became known as "Copperheads."

The Patriot definitely wasn't in this camp. The Register fully supported the Union. On April 26th it printed the words to the Star Spangled Banner on page 1. It approved suppressing the south. "WAR BEGUN!—Civil War was formally inaugurated in Charleston harbor on Friday last, by order of Jeff. Davis' bogus government ...The result is, that after being invested by 10,000 troops, and submitting to a bombardment of some 36 hours, this heroic little garrison of 70 men, pressed by hunger and fire, surrendered to the enemy. And thus is inaugurated the great Cotton Rebellion of 1861." Interestingly, the Register noted on April 26th that towns on Cape Cod were having meetings to support the union.

Yarmouth had one which was reported, and the Register further reported that in Sandwich a "very large and enthusiastic meeting" took place on April 21 and that patriotic addresses were made by Major S.B. Phinney, Dr. J.N. Swasey, M. Pinkham, and others." It failed to note that Major S.B. Phinney was none other than

the editor and proprietor of the Barnstable Patriot! Phinney continued to criticize the Lincoln administration's handling of the war throughout its duration. While the war of words with the Yarmouth Register lessened, it never ceased entirely. Only Lincoln's death resulted in kind words about him from the Patriot, giving grudging approval for the way Lincoln handled the war and his ideas for restoring the union.

But no kind words were written about each other by the two editors during this period. It wasn't until 1869 when Phinney retired from the Patriot that Swift begrudgingly wrote, "Barnstable's history could never have been written without recording the services of this versatile editor, farmer, and politician."