

# Trains, Canes, and Replica Log Cabins

## Benjamin Harrison's 1888 Front-Porch Campaign for the Presidency

JEFFREY NORMAND BOURDON

On June 25, 1888, within seconds of hearing the news that Benjamin Harrison had garnered the Republican nomination for the presidency at the party's Chicago convention, journalists reported seeing a "surging throng of excited and yelling men" at the corner of Market and Pennsylvania Streets in Indianapolis. One ruffian, according to accounts in the *Sun*, took out a revolver and "fired it rapidly six times" in celebration. With crowds gathering from all directions, a thousand people soon thronged in front of the candidate's downtown office, screaming "Harrison, Harrison!" and, taking his bow from his office window as a sign, ran inside and "frantically" reached for his hand.<sup>1</sup>

Indianapolis citizens who congratulated the new nominee found themselves part of a surprisingly physical encounter. A young man who exclaimed, "Here goes my first vote, general!" received a hand clasp of "unusual warmth." A female employee from Harrison's office reportedly threw her arms around the nominee's neck and kissed him, saying, "Oh, general,

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Jeffrey Normand Bourdon is an adjunct instructor at the University of Mississippi. He would like to thank his dad, Normand Bourdon, for all of his love and support throughout the years.

<sup>1</sup>*Indianapolis Sun*, June 25, 1888, p. 1.

I am so glad." Following this interlude, Harrison proceeded to his home on North Delaware Street, where a "small crowd of enthusiasts"—including "many ladies," friends, and acquaintances—awaited his arrival. Asked by one neighbor if she planned to prepare a few cans of fruit to use in the White House, the candidate's wife, Caroline, responded that a "harder fight was yet to come," and that she would wait until the campaign was over before making such preparations.<sup>2</sup> Such intimate, domestic encounters would become a regular part of Harrison's campaign. Within a few hours of being nominated for the presidency, Harrison had already established a routine that would eventually include his greeting more than 300,000 visitors with speeches, handshakes, and a personal welcome to his house. These personal touches were the cornerstone of what later became known as Harrison's front-porch campaign.

Evidence of the scale of popular support for Harrison's candidacy was not long in coming. Before the end of the evening, trains from a fifty-mile radius had brought in "great numbers" of citizens, including representatives from several political clubs, to visit the Harrison home. In what would become a typical scene, each group received a short, "spicy" speech from Harrison upon arrival.<sup>3</sup> H. C. Ackenbrock, a native of Arkansas City, Arkansas, residing in Indianapolis, ran to Harrison's place in order to be the first Arkansan to personally congratulate the candidate. The prominent African American newspaper man W. Allison Sweeney led a crowd to the home in a decorated carriage.<sup>4</sup> An African American band called the Hotel Brotherhood escorted a group of one thousand men to the home as they played "Hail to the Chief." Throughout the city, residents, according to the *Sun*, "suddenly turned loose on the streets"; although business was not suspended, "it might as well have been."<sup>5</sup> Some Harrison supporters brought an artillery piece to Circle Park, where they fired a salute; others blew horns, while one procession of men marched through the city with "544"—the number of votes that Harrison had won to capture the nomination—chalked on their backs. In what could only have reflected careful advance planning, hundreds of pictures of Harrison, placed next to American flags, quickly graced the exterior walls of the city's buildings, while a "variety of new campaign

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., June 26, 1888, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., June 25, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., June 26, 1888, p. 4.



Benjamin Harrison in 1889, his first year as president.  
Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site

badges suddenly made their appearance" in local stores. As "wagons, open carriages, and tally-ho coaches," all of them filled with supporters, rolled down the streets, police were eventually called to protect the Harrison property from injury.<sup>6</sup> The horn blowing continued well into the night and resumed early the next morning.<sup>7</sup>

Historians have written a great deal about the content of Harrison's speeches in the 1888 campaign. The Republican candidate was an issue-oriented speaker who espoused a high-protective tariff schedule to protect working Americans. He promoted electoral reform, calling for improved voter registration laws and district apportionment rules and speaking out against ballot stuffing. Other issues in the Republican campaign that season included the federal revenue surplus, Civil War pensions, the Homestead Act, workers' pension benefits, railroad regulation, and civil service support for benevolent and penal associations.<sup>8</sup> This article focuses, instead, on where and how the candidate presented his stance on such issues, and in particular on how Harrison's successful front-porch campaign involved other participants—from Mrs. Harrison to the city's police force, from the citizens of Indianapolis to the thousands of men and women who came from out of town, from Civil War veterans to former supporters of William Henry Harrison's Whig campaigns of 1836 and 1840. For those who could not come to Indianapolis, newspaper coverage of his speeches and of virtually every personal detail about Harrison—the hands he shook, the gifts he received, his evocative memories of his grandfather and the Civil War, his interactions with women and children, even his attendance at local baseball games—made the candidate and his wife, in the boastful words of one report, "the property of the country."<sup>9</sup> Whether through personal exposure or newspaper accounts, voters' impressions of Harrison's folksy, personable style went a long way toward dispelling any sense of him as an elitist, out-of-touch Republican. At a time when Gilded Age politicians molded their arguments, in the words of historian Mark Summers, "to appeal to the voter as a member of a family, rather than as a citizen of the

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<sup>6</sup>*Washington Post*, June 26, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>*Washington Post*, June 27, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup>Harry Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison: Hoosier Statesman, From the Civil War to the White House, 1865-1888* (New York, 1959), 127, and on Harrison's front-porch campaign, 371-88; Charles W. Calhoun, *Minority Victory: Gilded Age Politics and the Front-Porch Campaign of 1888* (Lawrence, Kan., 2008), 87, 132-34. The most recent biography is Calhoun, *Benjamin Harrison* (New York, 2005).

<sup>9</sup>*Springfield Republican*, October 29, 1888, p. 4.

republic,” the sight of a candidate campaigning from his own home and in a local park brought a personal dimension to abstract issues.<sup>10</sup> In the first comprehensive historical treatment of the election of 1888, Charles Calhoun posited that “Harrison and his allies proved more adept and persuasive in merchandizing their program—principally the tariff.”<sup>11</sup> This article will argue that Harrison’s front-porch campaign was largely responsible for this success, helping to transform the capable political operative into a warm, understanding candidate able to identify with voters on the fringes of an ever-changing, sometimes difficult economy. Harrison’s homebound style, captured by newspapers around the country, helped him to overcome any perception that he might be aloof and distant from the folks back home and, as a consequence, to win one of the closest presidential contests in American history and unseat incumbent Grover Cleveland.

Harrison came by his oratorical and political skills naturally as the great-grandson of a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the grandson of William Henry Harrison, the successful Whig presidential candidate who had embarked on the first presidential speaking tour in 1840. Benjamin was born in his grandfather’s home in North Bend, Ohio, in 1833. Harrison was raised a devout Presbyterian and remained active in his faith throughout his life. He attended Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, where he studied the nation’s economic laws and worked on his public speaking skills.<sup>12</sup>

In 1853, Harrison married Caroline Scott, the daughter of a former Miami University professor; the next year he passed the bar and the couple moved to Indianapolis. The couple would reside there or in Washington, D.C., for the rest of their lives. Harrison worked his way up in the law profession, building a small fortune on his own and proclaiming that “fame is truly honorable and fortune only desirable when they have been *earned*.”<sup>13</sup> In 1857, Harrison joined the new Republican Party and won his first political contest to become the city attorney for Indianapolis. He went on to become the reporter for the state’s Supreme Court in 1860 before joining the Union Army as a lieutenant in the 70th Indiana Volunteer

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<sup>10</sup>Mark Summers, *Party Games: Getting, Keeping, and Using Power in Gilded Age Politics* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004), 35.

<sup>11</sup>Calhoun, *Minority Victory*, 125.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 88.

Infantry. Soon rising to the rank of colonel, he ended the war with the rank of brevet brigadier general.<sup>14</sup>

In the late 1860s and early 1870s, Harrison frequently stumped for Republican candidates for local and state offices. In his professional capacity, he helped to prosecute lawbreakers associated with the 1877 railway strike. On a personal level, however, Harrison exhibited discomfort in mingling with people other than close friends and associates, leading some observers to see him as socially icy. Nevertheless, late in 1880, Harrison was appointed to the U.S. Senate by the Republican-dominated Indiana legislature. During his six years working in that body, he lobbied hard for Civil War soldiers' pension benefits, federal aid to education, and the admission of Dakota to the Union. He lost the seat in 1887, in part because of legislative reapportionment that once again favored Democrats in Indiana.<sup>15</sup>

As the Republican convention convened at Chicago in June 1888, many party insiders considered New York senator James Blaine to be the favorite for the presidential nomination. Party leaders adopted a strong protectionist stance, along with a promise to use federal surplus money for veterans' benefits as well as internal improvements, and they insisted on the right of all citizens to vote and have their votes counted. Although delegates agreed on these issues, the Republicans divided over their choice of a nominee. Over the course of several days and eight separate votes, the delegates finally decided on Harrison, with New York's Levi Morton as his running mate.<sup>16</sup> Now the party had to figure out how to run its candidates against an incumbent president.

Between 1840 and 1872, five major party nominees had gone on speaking tours: William Henry Harrison in 1840, Winfield Scott in 1852, Stephen Douglas in 1860, Horatio Seymour in 1868, and Horace Greeley in 1872. The only candidate who had won was Harrison. In 1880, upon receiving the Republican nomination for the presidency, Ohio-based James A. Garfield tried a different technique, entertaining visitors at his home. By September, the dark horse candidate was stump speaking in front of hundreds and thousands of followers from his front porch. He won the election that November. Four years later, Republican Blaine undertook a speaking tour in his bid for the presidency. The results were disastrous—it was on the campaign trail that the candidate was introduced by Reverend

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 119. On the convention, see pp. 102-20.

Samuel Burchard, who slurred opposing Democrats as the party of “Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion,” in the process swinging Catholic votes away from the Republican effort.<sup>17</sup>

In an 1888 letter to Whitelaw Reid, Harrison noted that “there is great risk of meeting a fool at home, but the candidate who travels cannot avoid him.”<sup>18</sup> In June of that year, he chose to copy the success of his grandfather and James Garfield, allowing the public to visit his home. As Calhoun has written: “In the midst of the most important campaign of his life, it seemed a profound waste for him to sit in his parlor and leave the work to others.”<sup>19</sup>

With its central location and easy rail access, and its populist, no-nonsense business attitude, Indianapolis seemed a logical base for a highly organized, ever-expanding front-porch campaign. The city had largely recovered from the Panic of 1873 when, in the words of one *Harper's Weekly* reporter, “the unexpected collapse of the land boom mowed down Indianapolis fortunes like grass in a field.” Ninety-four building associations operated at full capacity; twelve railroads ran through the city's new Union Station, “one of the handsomest and most convenient stations” in the country.<sup>20</sup> Located in the center of the state, Indianapolis was roughly equidistant from Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, and Illinois—and even lay within “easy speaking distance” of West Virginia.<sup>21</sup> Politically, the city gathered something from all these regional influences. “As goes Center Township so goes Marion County,” one

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<sup>17</sup>On the elections of 1840 through 1888, see Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., ed., *History of Presidential Elections, 1789-1968* (New York, 1971), vols. 1 and 2. On the evolution of presidential campaigning in the nineteenth century, see Gil Troy, *See How They Ran: The Changing Role of the Presidential Candidate* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991). On other campaigns from the period, see R. Hal Williams, *Realigning America: McKinley, Bryan, and the Remarkable Election of 1896* (Lawrence, Kan., 2010), esp. 129-45; and Mark Summers, *Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion: The Making of a President, 1884* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 2000). On Gilded Age politics and culture, see Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1948); H. Wayne Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley: National Party Politics, 1877-1896* (Syracuse, N. Y., 1969); Robert D. Marcus, *Grand Old Party: Political Structure in the Gilded Age, 1880-1896* (New York, 1971); R. Hal Williams, *Years of Decision: American Politics in the 1890s* (New York, 1978); Michael McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York, 1986); Joel Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (Stanford, Calif., 1991); Robert Cherny, *American Politics in the Gilded Age, 1868-1900* (Wheeling, Ill., 1997); Alan Ware, *The Democratic Party Heads North, 1877-1962* (New York, 2006); and Charles Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt To Full Dinner Pail: The Transformation of Politics and Governance in the Gilded Age* (New York, 2010).

<sup>18</sup>Calhoun, *Minority Victory*, 132-33.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>20</sup>*Harper's Weekly*, August 11, 1888, p. 601.

<sup>21</sup>*Indianapolis Journal*, July 18, 1888, p. 5.

Democratic leader explained to a reporter, and "as goes Marion County so goes Indiana, and as goes Indiana so goes the Union."<sup>22</sup>

Harrison's campaign managers felt that the family home on North Delaware Street would work well as the backdrop for their effort. An article in *Harper's Weekly* portrayed the candidate as "a good, thorough-going Indianapolis citizen [who] has the respect of his neighbors, and the love and confidence of every child within walking distance of his own house" and described his home as "a plain brick structure, shaded by trees and embellished on one side by a growth of ivy," not "pretentious" but instead "comfortable and reasonably commodious."<sup>23</sup> A Washington newspaper noted that one picture of Harrison's grandfather, William Henry, was prominently displayed inside the parlor and another hung in the hallway.<sup>24</sup> Articles commented on the house's "tasteful adornment" and "contented air of moderate elegance," and speculated on its market value.<sup>25</sup> The *Indianapolis Journal* sketched the candidate's study and parlor, alongside an image of the house in which the Harrisons had first lived when they moved to Indianapolis. Even the details of the newer home's construction drew notice: readers learned that Harrison had paid his contractor in advance; when the man disappeared from the city with the workers' money before the house was finished, Harrison paid all seventeen workers "full the stipulated wages" out of his own pocket. Several locals who had helped build the house publicly backed the story.<sup>26</sup>

As the crowds gathered at Harrison's home continued to grow through the summer, campaign planners elected to move some of his speeches to nearby University Park, between New York and Vermont Streets at what is now the southern end of the War Memorial.<sup>27</sup> The *Journal* described a stand built for the candidate on the east side of the park, "handsomely decorated" with flags and protected from the sun by overhanging trees.<sup>28</sup> By September, Harrison's handlers had set up a new, larger platform for their man to speak from.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>*Washington Post*, November 2, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup>*Harper's Weekly*, August 11, 1888, p. 604.

<sup>24</sup>*Washington Post*, July 5, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup>*Indianapolis Sun*, June 29, 1888, p. 4; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 1, 1888.

<sup>26</sup>*Indianapolis Journal*, July 5, 1888, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup>Charles Hedges, comp., *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison, Twenty-Third President of the United States* (New York, 1892), 57.

<sup>28</sup>*Indianapolis Journal*, July 26, 1888.

<sup>29</sup>*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 16, 1888, p. 4.





Benjamin Harrison home, North Delaware Street, Indianapolis. Harrison's home became a central image of his presidential campaign, as thousands of supporters flocked to the site to hear him speak, offer him gifts, and shake his hand.

Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site

Harrison's managers operated his campaign with national and state committees, as well as an organized group of local supporters. Pennsylvania senator Matthew Quay, who headed the national committee out of New York, had initially opposed the front-porch plan but later wired Harrison, "Keep at it, you're making votes." In August, Quay wrote to another campaign advisor, "If Harrison has the strength to [keep talking from his home], we could safely close these headquarters and he would elect himself."<sup>30</sup> James Huston, who headed Harrison's Indiana committee, coordinated all statewide Republican activities outside of Indianapolis. Locally, Harrison's supporters created a committee on arrangements to deal with large delegations of visitors

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<sup>30</sup>Morgan, *From Hayes to McKinley*, 306.

and to schedule their proposed visits. On August 17, they announced the formation of the "Harrison Marching Society."<sup>31</sup> Members of the society's entertainment subcommittee and a marching band greeted each delegation at Union Station and started the procession, either to the front porch on Delaware Street or to University Park, depending on the size of the crowd. Because the leaders of visiting groups often addressed the crowd before Harrison gave his welcoming speech, the local committee inspected the text of every speech for inflammatory or embarrassing remarks. The edited version, given back to the chairman of the visiting group, was re-examined one more time before that person spoke to make "assurance doubly sure" that it fit the campaign's agenda.<sup>32</sup> Following the speeches, members of the entertainment subcommittee helped the visitors back to the train station.

The initial, positive reception given the earliest visiting delegations by the energetic Indianapolis crowds proved a telling precursor of Harrison's front-porch campaign. On the evening of August 4, some four hundred railroad workers arrived from Terre Haute in a lavishly decorated train with silk banners and flags celebrating the campaign. After being cheered at the station by "several thousand people," the visitors formed procession lines and marched down the streets to cheering throngs on every block. At the head of the procession, a group of men pushed one wagon that carried a thirty-five-foot-long model of a locomotive and another that held a model of a boxcar.<sup>33</sup> Inside the locomotive sat an engineer in charge of the valves and a red light in a smokestack, as well as a fireman who rang its bell.<sup>34</sup> The candidate welcomed the railroad workers with a promise of support for legislative measures on their behalf: "We shall yet see legislation in the direction of providing some suitable tribunal of arbitration for the settlement of differences between railroad men and the companies that engage their services." In reference to his high protective tariff schedule, Harrison reminded them that "Terre Haute is conspicuous for its industries. . . . You have found that that policy which built up these shops, which maintains them, which secures the largest output yearly from the factories, which gives employment to the largest number of men, is the best thing not only

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<sup>31</sup>In February 1889, the group renamed itself and officially incorporated as the Columbia Club. Its third, and current, headquarters is a landmark on Monument Circle.

<sup>32</sup>Sievers, *Benjamin Harrison*, 372; Calhoun, *Benjamin Harrison*, 52-53.

<sup>33</sup>*Indianapolis Journal*, August 5, 1888, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, August 5, 1888, p. 10.

for the railroads . . . but for the workingmen.”<sup>35</sup> Harrison then invited each new visitor to meet him personally.

Harrison’s local backers willingly allowed their visitors to take center stage as the occasion warranted. On August 18, visitors from Peoria and Bloomington, Illinois, as well as Terre Haute and Lafayette, Indiana, came to visit Harrison. The groups’ loud “rivalry” in support of their candidate, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, produced “some pretty demonstrations of music and marching.” The Peoria men wore black silk hats, long linen dusters, and sunshades made from American flags. The Bloomington men wore similar outfits colored “merely the solid colors of red, white, and blue.” The Indiana demonstrators were content to wear their everyday outfits. The visitors, reported the *Tribune*, “took over the town” upon their arrival, as their carriages sped around and band contests became “the order of the day.” On their way to Harrison’s home, the men executed “pretty” marching movements, “with a sort of manual of arms executed with the umbrellas.”<sup>36</sup> In his talk to the crowd, Harrison framed his tariff proposals against the Democrats’ plan: “Do not allow any one to persuade you that this great contest as to our tariff policy is one between schedules. It is not a question of a seven per cent reduction. [Applause] It is a question between wide-apart principles. [Cries of ‘That’s right!’].”<sup>37</sup>

In what proved to be perhaps the campaign’s most exciting day, a group of five hundred Republican members of the Chicago Commercial Travelers’ Association came to town on September 22; they were met by what one Harrison biographer described as the “entire business community” of Indianapolis.<sup>38</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* called the energetic arrival of the delegation a “genuine sensation,” describing the “jovial hilarious, big-hearted body of men” as it approached the city in a train “loaded to capacity with choice viands and choice liquors.” Chicago traveler Joseph Pomroy figured out that his red, white, and blue umbrella fit perfectly when placed diagonally through an open train window, and in less than ten minutes “every window in the train blossomed out with National colors,” arousing even more cheers as the visitors pulled in to Indianapolis.<sup>39</sup>

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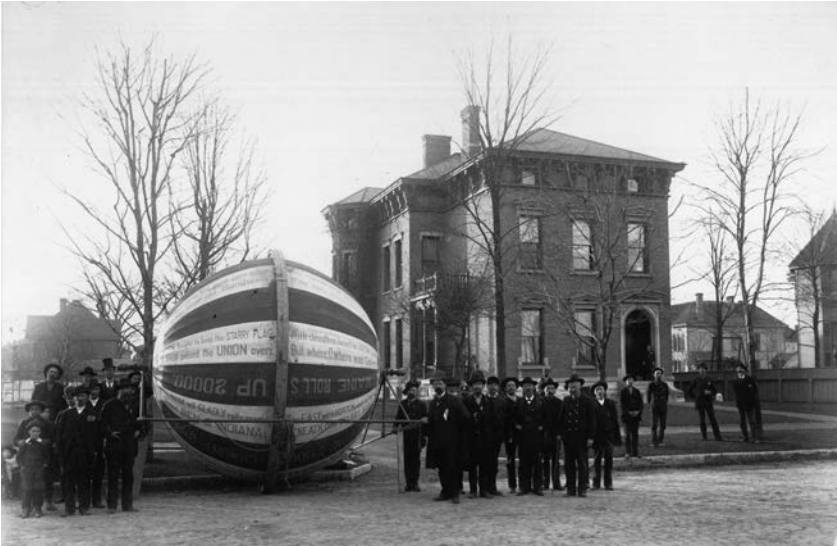
<sup>35</sup>Hedges, *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison*, 75-76.

<sup>36</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, August 19, 1888, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup>Hedges, *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison*, 93.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>39</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, September 23, 1888, p. 10.



Campaign Ball, Benjamin Harrison Home. Harrison supporters brought a variety of fanciful and festive campaign symbols to the North Delaware Street house during the 1888 presidential campaign.

Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site

The Chicago visitors' march from Union Station to Harrison's house was the grandest procession of a summer filled with such events. Large portraits of Harrison and American flags adorned every building, and as the group passed they waved their flags and their Harrison-and-Morton banners in reply. As the police tried to clear space in front of Harrison's house, the incoming crowd waved hats, canes, flags, and "every other movable article" at the sight of the candidate. Some visitors carried cases bearing the inscription "Orders from the house, vote for General Harrison," while others handed out cards reading "A handkerchief, a voice, a pale one dollar; but four slugs of whiskey sour make a howling Democrat."<sup>40</sup> In his speech that day, the candidate appealed to the business-minded delegation with a defense of tariffs, reminding them that "the South offered free trade to Europe in exchange for an expected recognition of their independence by England and France. . . . They dallied with Southern agents . . . and thus encouraged the South to protract a hopeless struggle."<sup>41</sup> Following Harrison's remarks, the men continued to University

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Hedges, *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison*, 141-42.

Park, where they spent the evening speech-making, singing, and engaging in other “campaign hilarity.”<sup>42</sup> Such newspaper reports, which emphasized wide participation and the crowds’ excitement, enhanced the success of what Summers has labelled “hoopla politics.” Media accounts abetted the Harrison campaign’s desire “to draw out the rank and file, both to ratify the nominations by their presence at public events and to stir up a sense of connection with the candidate and the party.”<sup>43</sup>

Women comprised an important part of the campaign crowds. In early July, a group of five women from Indianapolis’s east side chopped down a seventy-five-foot tree and brought it into town, where they attached flags and streamers to the trunk, intending, as the *Indianapolis Journal* explained, to support “the interest of Harrison and Morton and protection to American industries.” No better sign of a candidate’s support existed, the *Journal* announced, than “when ladies will drive out into the country . . . cut down a tree, trim it of its branches, hitch a horse to the trunk and drag it to the road, then chain it to a wagon and drive it to the city; take their shovels and sink the hole in which to raise the pole.”<sup>44</sup>

Harrison worked hard to link his protective tariff stance to women’s issues. On September 15, some 300 members of the Irish-American Republican Club descended on Indianapolis, waving a gigantic silk banner presented to them by the female members of the city’s High School Republican Club. The banner read, “Protection: It’s Irish You Know.”<sup>45</sup> Harrison asked the crowd:

Who, if not Irish-Americans versed in the sad story of the commercial ruin of the island they love should be able to appreciate the friendly influences of the protective system upon their individual and upon their home life? Which of you has not realized that not the lot of man only, but the lot of woman, has been made softer and easier under its influence? [Applause and ‘Hear! Hear!'] Contrast the American mother and wife, burdened only with the cares of motherhood and of the household, with the condition of women in many of the countries of the Old World, where she is loaded also with the drudgery of toil in the field.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, September 23, 1888, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup>Summers, *Party Games*, 49, 37.

<sup>44</sup>*Indianapolis Journal*, July 6, 1888, p. 7.

<sup>45</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, September 16, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup>Hedges, *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison*, 125. Summers notes that appeals to male voters as family members had become common by the 1880s. See Summers, *Party Games*, 35.

Women remained central to the public image of Harrison's front-porch campaign. On August 17, "a glee club of twenty pretty young women. . . bewitchingly uniformed in navy blue dresses with encircling broad gold band, light felt men's hats" led a group from Jacksonville, Illinois. Entering University Park, the women occupied "a place of honor" in front of the speaker's stand. Later that day, as the crowd swelled, the "pretty Illinois girls acted as an Amazonian guard to the General and prevented the crowd surging sideways against the moving column."<sup>47</sup> Such active demonstrations of women's enthusiasm for Harrison, printed in newspapers across the country, projected to women around the country that they were more than just ornaments on the campaign trail and instead were real participants.<sup>48</sup>

Caroline Harrison also played an instrumental role in campaign publicity. On October 28, thirty-six members of the Carrie Harrison Club from Oxford, Ohio, came to meet their club's namesake. The group's president, Mrs. Rachel Martin, stated that each of the fifty-two members had already secured pledges for between one and three votes for the candidate. Her group, which according to the *Washington Post* included "a female band of sixteen pieces," led "a column of nearly fifteen hundred men" to Harrison's house.<sup>49</sup>

Children, too, were important to the Harrison campaign's strategy. On October 8, a group of one hundred women and children (the latter ranging in age from seven to fifteen years) came to see the candidate. Six-year-old Charles Pettijohn headed the group astride a pony, followed by a drum corps of eight boys. Girls dressed in red, white, and blue and carrying "mounted Japanese lanterns" sang "Marching through Georgia" on their way to Harrison's home. "Children have always been attractive to me," Harrison told the group. "Little ones often say wise things. . . Some of the best friends I have are under ten years of age, and after to-night I am sure that I shall have many more, for all your names will be added."<sup>50</sup> A few weeks earlier, Harrison had encountered a group of thirty children, between the ages of four and twelve years, while on his way home. The leader of the group shouted out to Harrison, "I take great pleasure in introducing to you these children whose parents are working men and women, and who desire the success of the Republican party, the true friend

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<sup>47</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, August 18, 1888, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup>Summers, *Party Games*, 41.

<sup>49</sup>*Washington Post*, October 7, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup>Hedges, *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison*, 106.



Caroline Harrison in her inaugural gown, 1889. Caroline's grace and dignity in the midst of her husband's highly public front-porch campaign captured the admiration of reporters and helped to reshape the candidate's public image.

Benjamin Harrison Presidential Site



of working men, women, and children everywhere.” The children then chanted, “We are for Harrison, he is the man. If we can’t vote, our daddies can.” Harrison’s brief “fatherly” address to the group once again drove home the connection of high tariffs to the cause of protecting families and homes, just as it helped the candidate to mold a more personable public image.<sup>51</sup>

African American delegations constituted an important additional element to Harrison’s front-porch appeal. On August 3, the *New York Herald* noted the presence of forty “colored” men among a group of nearly three thousand visitors from Clinton and Montgomery Counties.<sup>52</sup> Two weeks later, dozens more African American men arrived as part of a loud group from Rush County.<sup>53</sup> Two days earlier, 150 members of the Concordia Commandery of Knights Templar, an African American lodge in Chicago, had visited Harrison at his house on their way to Louisville to attend the Knights Templar convocation. The candidate and his wife met them at the door of their home.<sup>54</sup> Sometimes Harrison spoke directly to African American delegations about their plight in America. To a group of three hundred black members of the Harrison League of Indianapolis, he remarked:

My memory goes back to a time when colored witnesses were first allowed to appear in court in this State to testify in cases where white men were parties. Prior to that time, as you know, you had been excluded from the right to tell in court, under oath, your side of the story. . . I have lived to see this unfriendly legislation removed from our statute-books and the unfriendly section of our State Constitution repealed. I have lived not only to see that, but to see the race emancipated and slavery extinct.<sup>55</sup>

Regardless of the composition of the crowds who gathered at the Harrison home and University Park, the campaign relied upon several recurring themes and practices to engage public support: ostentatious patriotism, celebrations of William Henry Harrison’s 1840 election, commemorations of the Civil War, and a ritualized presentation of gifts to

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<sup>51</sup>*Springfield Republican*, September 30, 1888, p.4; Summers, *Party Games*, 52.

<sup>52</sup>*New York Herald*, August 4, 1888, p. 10.

<sup>53</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 1888, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, August 14, 1888, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup>Hedges, *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison*, 34.



the candidate and his wife. Patriotism functioned as the most common and encompassing theme. Virtually every group that came to town waved American flags, and many added to the effect with red, white, and blue outfits. Flags adorned many of the buildings that lined the marchers' route to the Harrison home. Uncle Sam proved a popular symbol among the demonstrators, just as the image of John Bull—suggesting the Democrats' fealty to Great Britain—provided a comical counterpoint.<sup>56</sup>

Many of the processions celebrated the memory of the election of 1840, when William Henry Harrison (former territorial governor of Indiana) had risen to national power with running mate John Tyler, behind the memorable rallying cry of "Tippecanoe and Tyler too." Men who had voted for the Whig candidate in 1836 and 1840 now supported his grandson a half-century later. On August 7, three groups from Tippecanoe County came to Indianapolis bearing a "dingy, old, patched Harrison banner of 1840," which they put on the candidate's speaking platform while he thanked them for their support.<sup>57</sup> Another procession of elderly Tippecanoe residents came to Indianapolis carrying a banner that read "Young Whigs/Veteran Voters" and featured, in each of its four corners, key dates for the Harrison clan and the American republic: 1836, 1840, 1876, and 1888.<sup>58</sup>

The 1840 campaign had also been known as the "Log Cabin/Hard Cider" campaign after William Henry Harrison, accused by Democrats of staying in his cabin and drinking cider all day, chose to turn the insult to advantage. In tribute to the log cabin image, two Indianapolis natives, John Warren and R. S. Smith, built the younger Harrison a replica log cabin, seven feet long and six feet wide, which they rolled to the front of Harrison's house for use as a refreshment stand.<sup>59</sup> While Mrs. Harrison met the guests and received their gifts, the candidate "crowded through the small door" and stood underneath it.<sup>60</sup> Two weeks later, the log cabin image functioned quite differently when a group of visitors from Brown and Morgan Counties brought two miniature houses to North Delaware Street. One house was a log cabin replica which was "complete even to the rail fence around it, the mud chimney, and the old well sweep" and labeled "Our log cabin of 1840—Our boys will show you our present house." The second—"a

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<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>57</sup>*New York Herald*, August 8, 1888, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup>*Indianapolis Journal*, August 5, 1888, p. 9.

<sup>59</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, July 18, 1888, p. 5.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, July 21, 1888, p. 2.



Harrison campaign banner, 1888. Harrison supporters drew upon the memory of the 1840 Log Cabin campaign of the candidate's grandfather, William Henry Harrison.

Courtesy Library of Congress

representative of a new modern cottage with a wire fence, fly screens, brick chimney, etc.”—symbolized the kind of dwelling Harrison’s supporters could hope for when the candidate’s protective tariffs were enacted. A transparency laid over the display read: “Protect our labor that we may not go back to the log cabin of our fathers.”<sup>61</sup>

The memory of the Civil War also played a major symbolic role in the campaign. Speaking to a group of 200 former Union prisoners of war, Harrison announced that “the annals of the war fail to furnish a sadder story than that of the host of Union veterans who suffered war’s greatest hardship—captivity. . . It is the black spot without any lining of silver or any touch of human nature.”<sup>62</sup> On another occasion, Harrison hosted Civil War veterans from various states accompanied by “eighty members of the Woman’s Relief Corps.”<sup>63</sup> Harrison also received a “tattered old battle-flag” from seven survivors of the 21st Illinois Infantry—Ulysses S. Grant’s original regiment at the beginning of the war.<sup>64</sup>

Log cabins and Civil War flags proved to be only some of the many gifts that Harrison and his family received from visiting delegations. Gift exchange was an integral part of Harrison’s front-porch campaign. In 1880, James Garfield had allowed visitors to his home in Mentor, Ohio, to pick vegetables from his gardens and apples from his orchards to make the visit feel more personal, but he had not, as a rule, received gifts in return. Eight years later, the ritual had changed. Many of the gifts brought by Harrison’s visitors were linked to the memory of 1840. The general received a five-foot by six-foot silk banner that had circulated to promote his grandfather’s candidacy.<sup>65</sup> Harrison even received a manuscript of his grandfather’s inaugural address from March 4, 1841.<sup>66</sup>

Canes also became popular gifts to bring to Indianapolis, drawing upon Harrison’s promise to prop up and support America with his economic policies. Harrison’s first “caning,” as the *Indianapolis Journal* called it, came from a group of Irish-Catholic supporters from Wisconsin. Another came from a flagpole used during the 1840 campaign, while a third came from former Union prisoner-of-war Charles Berry, who carved a hickory cane

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<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, August 2, 1888, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup>Hedges, *Speeches of Benjamin Harrison*, 129-30.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>65</sup>*Indianapolis Journal*, July 4, 1888, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, July 4, 1888, p. 2.

featuring raised figures of the U.S. Capitol, a log cabin from 1840, the state seal of Indiana, and the words "General Benjamin Harrison, nominated for President at the Chicago Convention June 1888."<sup>67</sup>

Many gifts came freighted with symbolic meaning. Visitors from Springfield, Ohio, offered a "highly polished horseshoe, manufactured from American steel," while a group of railroad workers from Cincinnati brought the candidate a lantern light "as a signal that the republican train should go ahead."<sup>68</sup> Railroad and steel workers, of course, counted on Harrison's tariffs to protect them. In another instance, a visitor who presented Harrison with a "gaudy" umbrella—a symbol of protection from storms—told the candidate that, while the gift could have been bought for twenty-one cents less without trade restrictions, "wages would have been so low we fellows couldn't have spared time to come over and see you."<sup>69</sup> Gifts such as these served as powerful reminders that Harrison's message of assistance and protection was coming across clearly to listeners.

In addition to the speeches, celebrations, and gift exchanges, Harrison's front-porch strategy involved a great deal of close personal contact—much of it in the form of incessant handshaking. Harrison claimed that he liked to squeeze his visitors' hands first so they could not grasp his own too tightly. Standing on a platform and reaching down to his visitors with both hands at once, the general averaged, by one estimate, "over sixty shakes a minute."<sup>70</sup> While the ritual certainly helped to personalize the visit for Harrison's followers, his detractors took pleasure in criticizing him for it. The *New York Herald* dismissed Harrison's handshaking as "the customary pump handle exercises."<sup>71</sup> *Harper's Weekly* called it "a wholly unnecessary torture for a Presidential candidate" and reminded its readers that during his presidency George Washington had refused to shake hands for political purposes. Such criticism also played on public fears that the barrage of handshakes faced by William Henry Harrison on his way to Washington, D.C., had contributed to the new president's declining health by the time he arrived at the capital.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>*Indianapolis Journal*, August 17, 1888, p. 8; *Chicago Tribune*, July 12, 1888, p. 3.

<sup>68</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, October 23, 1888, p. 9; *Indianapolis Sun*, July 14, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>69</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, August 19, 1888, p. 14.

<sup>70</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, August 2, 1888, p. 2.

<sup>71</sup>*New York Herald*, October 6, 1888, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup>*Harper's Weekly*, September 1, 1888, p. 647.

Harrison's newly personable style was equally engineered to endear him to former enemies as well as current political opponents. One former Confederate officer from Tennessee approached the candidate inside his home, saying, "I was not with you from 61 to 64. . . but I am now."<sup>73</sup> In June, a group of two hundred Democrats visited Harrison, one man betting another that he would never actually meet the candidate. The *Indianapolis Sun* reported that the man did meet Harrison and "had an agreeable chat" with the candidate.<sup>74</sup>

Harrison and his wife also proved themselves capable of responding to the many unrehearsed moments that his campaign strategy invited. On one hot mid-July day, Caroline tripped and fell as they walked down the stairs of their home to meet his campaign committee for lunch. The candidate "hastily" helped her up and Mrs. Harrison took his arm with "admirable composure." On the same afternoon, when a reporter from the *New York Sun* was "overcome" by heat during Harrison's speech, the candidate instructed his son to help the man into the house and call a physician for him.<sup>75</sup> Harrison remained outside, receiving "affectionate" kisses from several local women, "which did not seem to embarrass the General in the least," and shaking the "grimy hand[s]" of a group of "two dozen hackmen . . . wearing their shabby livery and misfit hats."<sup>76</sup>

Sympathetic reporters found that interviewing Harrison's Indianapolis neighbors offered another effective way to personalize the candidate. The owner of a "modest" hat shop in Indianapolis, W. D. Seaton, stated that Harrison bought all of his hats from his store. Seaton had recently seen Harrison in a five-dollar silk hat that he had won on a bet and had been wearing for two years. "Talk about an aristocrat," the hat store owner quipped. Seaton also explained that Harrison's hat size—seven-and-a-half—was the largest in Indiana, while President Cleveland's was only seven-and-one-eighth. The German owner of a shoe shop two doors north of the hat shop would only report Harrison's foot measurements once he was assured that the name and address of his store would appear in the newspaper. Harrison preferred a "square-tipped English four lace Balmoral gaiter," the bootmaker revealed, "made of French calf with kangaroo tops, for which he invariably pays \$10." Apparently, Harrison had "one bunion on the right foot and no corns." Paul Krauss, Harrison's shirtmaker, proved much more open. Harrison liked ordinary-front shirts that cost twenty-seven dollars for a dozen, Krauss claimed, while Indiana

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<sup>73</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 1888, p. 5.

<sup>74</sup>*Indianapolis Sun*, June 30, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>75</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 1888, p. 1.

<sup>76</sup>*Washington Post*, July 5, 1888, p. 1.

Senator McDonald paid four or five dollars per shirt, usually linen or "French muslin garment." Senator McDonald wore twenty-five dollar silk underwear, he continued, but the presidential candidate liked "ordinary" underwear and preferred cheap handkerchiefs. Harrison's preferred tobacconist allowed that the candidate "smokes a clear Havana imported or domestic cigar" and that his favorite was a brand named "Daniel Webster." At the Denison House barber shop, an African American barber said that Harrison's head was "getting pretty bawl on top." According to the barber, "General Harrison is bery particular man, but he is a bery polite man."<sup>77</sup>

A visit to the candidate's tailor at L. S. Ayres dry-goods store revealed that "the General is a common dresser, for while he rarely pays less than \$45 for a suit he never goes above \$55." The man also noted that "the coat he had on the day he was nominated we made for him three years ago." Harrison's son-in-law, John R. McKee, offered that Harrison owned only one horse at a time, that he never wore "regulation evening costume" unless Mrs. Harrison asked him to, and that he liked "duck-shooting in the fall" and "bass-fishing in the spring or summer." He described Harrison as a consistent churchgoer and mentioned his proclivity for attending baseball games in Indianapolis.<sup>78</sup>

Harrison's front-porch campaign went a long way in personalizing him for the electorate, in the process making him more likable and, ultimately, more electable. Pro-Democrat news organs, sensing the danger of the campaign's success, criticized him for his methods. The *New York Herald* declared a Harrison speech "a good deal like picnic lemonade. It is cooling, diluted, abundant—with nothing to affect the morals or the health of the most innocent."<sup>79</sup> The *Cleveland Plain-Dealer* posited that Harrison was "in perfect misery" while he met the masses that called on him daily.<sup>80</sup> The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* rumored that the Republican National Committee had asked the candidate to "quit talking so much," adding that he might gain 100,000 votes if put into "temporary retirement."<sup>81</sup> In the face of such criticism, Republican papers across America continued to heap praise on the general for his ability to connect with all classes of men from the stump, to personalize his talks for each audience, and to avoid mistakes during his speeches.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>*Chicago Tribune*, August 26, 1888, p. 7.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup>*New York Herald*, August 7, 1888, p. 6.

<sup>80</sup>*Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, July 4, 1888, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup>*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 12, 22, 1888, both p. 4.

<sup>82</sup>*Indianapolis Journal*, July 22, 1888, p. 9.



Maybe even more importantly, Harrison's public appearances made for a telling contrast to his opponent's refusal to campaign actively. Siding with the traditional maxim that "the office sought the man," incumbent president Cleveland chose to maintain a laissez-faire style. The *Buffalo Express* asked its "Democrat brethren" two questions: "Why is it that no delegations of their party care enough for Cleveland to come great distances to offer him congratulations and pledge him loyal support? Why is it that Harrison's speeches are read with delight and Cleveland's mouth is padlocked?" For the *Express*, the answers seemed obvious: Harrison was a free choice while Cleveland was a necessity, and Harrison's ideas "spring forth fresh and vigorous from a brain teaming with crisp, incisive, pithy thoughts" while Cleveland had to "rummage in the musty and dusty leaves of an encyclopedia for ideas."<sup>83</sup> In chorus with the *Express*, the *Philadelphia American* posited that while Harrison addressed the people "without the smallest loss of personal dignity on his part," he could not "talk so much and say so little as the President did at the Virginia University commencement this summer."<sup>84</sup> At a time when Harrison made the most of the tariff issue, as Calhoun has pointed out, Cleveland "failed to dispel popular anxieties aroused by Republican warnings against free-trade." Instead, "adhering to notions of political decorum, Cleveland stood for the presidency in 1888; he did not run."<sup>85</sup> The incumbent's style mirrored that of his party: the Democrats had decided to run what they called an "educational campaign." As historian Michael McGerr points out, the party's turn away from "spectacle politics" had filtered down to local levels by 1888, as Democratic leaders organized fewer celebrations and devoted more effort and resources to circulating documents explaining their candidates and platform. Examples of such effort included one Connecticut Democratic Club formed "for the purpose of doing hard and honest work and not to enjoy themselves in torch light parades and banquets," and a Wisconsin club whose president promised "to abstain from such methods of campaigning as address themselves to the excitement of the emotions rather than educating or convincing the intelligence of our citizens. Torchlight processions, bonfires and all appeals to the emotions rather than to the judgment of men are to be barred."<sup>86</sup>

Benjamin Harrison's crowds may have been tough on the city's roads, disturbing to his neighbors, and controversial in the press, but the candi-

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<sup>83</sup>Reprinted in *ibid.*, August 13, 1888, p. 5.

<sup>84</sup>Reprinted in *ibid.*, August 13, 1888, p. 3.

<sup>85</sup>Calhoun, *Minority Victory*, 182, 132.

<sup>86</sup>McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, 87-89.

date's front-porch campaign was important in helping him win the election of 1888. It is true, as Calhoun writes, that the results were "so close and the variables so numerous it is impossible to explain Harrison's victory with precision or assurance."<sup>87</sup> With 5,443,892 popular votes to Cleveland's 5,534,488, Harrison became the first candidate to win a presidential election after losing the popular vote while winning the Electoral College.<sup>88</sup> The two swing states in the election were Indiana and New York—both had voted for Cleveland in the close race of 1884, and both switched four years later.

Harrison's Hoosier support was, nevertheless, not universal. In the state's seventeen southernmost counties, he lost to the Democrat by roughly 3500 votes. Harrison's support was stronger—but still close—in the state's twenty-eight western counties, where he won the popular vote with 70,632 popular votes to 69,956 for Cleveland. Indiana's twelve northernmost counties favored the Republican by a tally of 36,658 to 34,590. Ironically, however, he lost the one region in which his face-to-face campaign style might have been expected to help him the most—Indianapolis's Marion County.<sup>89</sup> Did the front-porch campaign alienate the voters who felt most strongly its effect on their daily lives? No evidence suggests such a direct link. On the other hand, the press record (even in the reportage of Democratic-leaning papers) does suggest convincingly that he ingratiated himself to every visiting delegation from elsewhere in the state, and that the front-porch campaign may have helped him to win Indiana and, with it, the Electoral College and therefore the presidency, in 1888. Trains, canes, and replica log cabins seemed silly to some observers, even at the time. But along with the many other details of this very public and very personal campaign, they went a long way in making Benjamin Harrison more likable to the electorate, both in the key, swing state of Indiana and beyond. Like Republicans Garfield before him and McKinley and Harding after, Benjamin Harrison's path to the presidency started from his front porch.



<sup>87</sup>Calhoun, *Minority Victory*, 178-81.

<sup>88</sup>In 1801, Thomas Jefferson's victory came through the House of Representatives as did John Quincy Adams's win in 1825.

<sup>89</sup>Walter Burnham, *Presidential Ballots, 1836-1892* (New York, 1976), 390-412.