

Schuyler Colfax: Whig Editor, 1845-1855*

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The blood of families of the English Puritan, the French Huguenot and the Dutch Reformed churches flowed in the veins of Schuyler Colfax. He was born in New York City on March 23, 1823. His paternal grandfather was General William Colfax, who, in the Revolutionary War, was commander of Washington's picked Life Guard.¹ At the close of the War, General Colfax married Hester Schuyler, a cousin of General Philip Schuyler. On the maternal side the ancestry of Schuyler Colfax included the La Masters and Strykers.² His mother was a Stryker. His father died a few months before the son was born. In 1834 Mrs. Colfax married George W. Matthews of Baltimore. In the meantime, Schuyler was attending the public schools of New York City. He did not go far in the attainment of a formal education and often referred in later life to his training in the school of experience.³

The year 1836 found the Matthews family contributing their part to the great westward movement of the period. Traveling by way of Buffalo and Detroit, they settled at New Carlisle, Indiana, just west of South Bend. Here young Schuyler Colfax spent the next five years clerking in his step-father's store and doing farm work in the surrounding community. The Matthews house was used for a Sunday school in which the step-father, mother and son were teachers.⁴ It is well to mention this in passing as the religious environment of Colfax had its influence on his later life.

* This paper was read at one of the sessions of the Annual Indiana History Conference, which was held at the Claypool Hotel, Indianapolis, on Dec. 10-11, 1937. The author is a professor of history on the faculty of Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana. He has been doing research on the political career of Schuyler Colfax for some time with a view to a doctoral dissertation. The article here published is but a part of a larger study which will be completed later. This account of the period when Colfax was a Whig editor in South Bend should be of interest to our readers.—*Editor.*

¹ *St. Joseph Valley Register*, Oct. 16, 1846 (Hereafter cited as *Register*). An original muster roll and a pay roll are now in the Indiana State Library, Colfax Mss.

² A. Y. Moore, *Life of Schuyler Colfax* (Philadelphia, c. 1868), 33; O. J. Hollister, *Life of Schuyler Colfax* (New York, 1886), 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁴ *Register*, July 6, 1854; Hollister, *op. cit.*, 23-26.

In 1841 the Matthews family moved to South Bend which remained the home of Schuyler Colfax until his death in 1885. Before locating in the city, Mr. Matthews had been elected Auditor of St. Joseph County on the Whig ticket. Young Schuyler was appointed Deputy-Auditor by Mr. Matthews. Interested in politics ever since he was a lad, his opportunities for studying the game were now greater than ever. He was expected to study law, which he did rather spasmodically, but apparently never intended to take it up as a profession. "Other subjects," he stated, interfered too much with his study. One of these other "subjects" was a love affair with Miss Evelyn Clark of Argyle, New York, whom he later married.

Another matter which interfered with the study of law was politics. The call to party activity was too strong. In debating clubs, mock legislatures and mock courts he and his friends fought out the issues of the day. Forces had played upon him from the beginning that made of him a steadfast Whig. His correspondence shows that relatives and friends often encouraged him to stand fast in the Whig faith.⁵

Interest in newspapers and journalism started at an early date. From youth on it was a common sight in the home to see Schuyler sprawled out on the floor poring over a newspaper. Nothing seemed to interest him more than the political events of the day. Not satisfied merely to read papers, he felt the urge to write articles. At the age of sixteen, he began writing for local papers and two years later he made arrangements with Horace Greeley to send in articles for the New York *Tribune*. "I shall be happy," Greeley wrote, "to hear from you on the terms so generously proposed by you as often as you think proper. . . . Write me whenever you have any thing to communicate Let me hear what you see and learn about Politics, Business, Crops, etc" During the years 1841-1843, Colfax was a fairly frequent contributor to the *Tribune*. His articles cover all sorts of conditions and subjects in Indiana: internal improvements, banking, crops, weather, temperance reform and, of course, politics, to mention only a few. They consti-

⁵ See, for example, a long letter from Colonel Ralph Clark, his future father-in-law, Apr. 9, 1841, Colfax Mss. Indiana State Library.

⁶ Greeley to Colfax, July 26, 1841, Colfax Mss. See also Hollister, *op. cit.* 30.

tute a not unimportant source for the study of Indiana history for these few years.⁷

The Puritan in Colfax made him a reformer. One of the reforms in which he was personally interested was that of temperance. A Total Abstinence Society was started in South Bend in the early eighteen-forties and grew rapidly. Colfax took the pledge of a tee-totaler sometime in 1842. To his fiancée, Miss Evelyn Clark, he announced that "since my return West I have taken an inward pledge against drinking any kind of liquor. Thus far I have kept it strictly, and in all my gayety and blithesomeness no temptation shall ever lead me to pollute my lips with the liquid fire."⁸ It appears that this pledge was never broken, but reforms of this kind could go too far, Colfax thought. On one occasion he and a few other youngsters pledged themselves to abstain from smoking for three months in order to test their moral fortitude. When congratulated for abandoning smoking he replied:

You congratulate me on abandoning smoking, but the pledge expired last week, and we have all been gloriously smoking ever since. One of the members broke the pledge; we tried and convicted him, and turned him out, and fined him one hundred Spanish cigars, which will last us some time. I don't think it does me much harm, if any, and I guess I won't join another anti-tobacco society soon.⁹

It seems that this pledge too was kept, for Colfax is believed to have been second only to Ulysses S. Grant when it came to smoking.

During the winter of 1842-43, Colfax had further experience as a newspaper reporter. He went to Indianapolis where he was engaged as Senate reporter for the *Indiana State Journal*, then published by a close friend and former fellow-townsmen, John D. Defrees. The latter's home, Colfax found a storm-center of Whig politics, so he was now in his element.¹⁰

After returning home from the legislative session, the Whigs of his section persuaded him to act as principal editor of the South Bend *Free Press*, a Whig journal. "It is done secretly," he wrote to his uncle. "The Locos suspect it, and

⁷ To cite but a few of these articles, see *New York Tribune* (weekly), March 5, 1842; May 14, 1842; July 23, 1842; Feb. 4, 1843.

⁸ Hollister, *op. cit.*, 34.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

hate me cordially; but I have a host of Whig friends. I tell you, my dear uncle, without egotism, the name you and I bear is not entirely unknown in Northern Indiana; and if an honorable ambition will serve, it will yet be known and hated by more Locos even than now." Writing of the resolutions adopted at the recent Whig District Convention—Colfax serving as Chairman of the Resolutions Committee—he continued: "You will see (they) are of the most ultra character; for I am an uncompromising Whig—Whig all over."¹¹

It will be seen by the foregoing that by 1845, Colfax was not a new-comer in the field of journalism. But in this year, his most important venture in the field was launched. He and Albert W. West purchased the South Bend *Free Press* and renamed it the *St. Joseph Valley Register*, with Colfax as editor. It was to be issued weekly. Said the editor in the first issue:

In presenting ourselves before you as the conductors of this paper, custom demands, and inclination requires, that we should set forth as briefly as possible, our intentions as to its future course. In *Politics*, we shall be inflexibly Whig, believing those principles the best and safest and wisest for the administration of our Government. With an abiding confidence that, sooner or later, those principles will gloriously and permanently triumph, we shall labor for them as zealously and faithfully when the prospect is dimmed by defeat or reverses, as when it is lit up by the sunshine of Victory.

The language used in defending these principles, however, would be such as to offend no reasonable opponent, the young Whig editor rashly declared.

As to the state debt the editor asserted that he would advocate the side of honesty against repudiation. He conceded that the state might not be able to pay every cent of the interest immediately. But common justice, he thought, demanded that as much of it as possible should be paid. "This done, we could all feel that the shame and blight-spot on our State's credit and fame had passed away. . . . We shall advocate a prompt settlement of the matter."

On the slavery issue, which was shortly to become still more important, a position between the extremes was announced: "We shall be opposed both to Calhounism and Birneyism, viewing them both as ultraisms. . . ." The editor condemned Calhoun for holding that slavery was a

¹¹ Colfax to George Colfax, March —, 1843, quoted in Hollister, *op. cit.*, 37; *Indiana State Journal*, Jan. 20, 1843.

national blessing and the cornerstone of the Republic. He criticized the Liberty Party more because he thought its position prevented calm and argumentative discussion in the South and thus tended to rivet the chains of the slave more firmly. He was opposed to any extension of slave territory, however, and declared he would hail the day when the southern states should see fit to adopt some feasible plan of emancipation.

The columns of the *Register* indicate that another announced policy—that of attention to agriculture—was carried out.

Agriculture shall always have a portion of our paper devoted to it, and *Education*, the hand-maid of Liberty—if not its twin sister—shall have its fair share; while the growing progress of this fertile Valley of our beautiful and gently-flowing River shall also be carefully watched. . . .

Every effort would be made to secure the latest news and to make the paper a real 'Register' of passing events. As long as there should be no Democratic paper in the County, it would be the policy of the *Register* to publish the official proceedings of Democratic Conventions when furnished with attested copies.

This "bow to the public" concluded as follows:

And now, kind Public, attached friends,—whose oft-repeated marks of esteem and kindness have made many of our past hours full of happiness—we have said *our* say. What say *you*?¹²

Contemporaries welcomed the new journal into the newspaper fraternity. The Richmond *Palladium* remarked that Colfax was an able writer and that his paper would be an efficient organ of the "Whigs of old St. Jo."¹³ The Rushville *Whig* had no doubt that Colfax would drive the "grey goose quill" with good effect. Said the Louisville *Journal*: "It is one of the very best papers in the State, and we have no doubt that its good influences will be deeply and extensively felt." The *Indiana State Journal* praised the editor as one having a thorough acquaintance with political subjects and as one of the best writers of the state. The Kalamazoo (Mich.) *Telegraph*, remarking that Colfax was one of the most effective writers in Indiana, added: "Besides . . . he is a gentleman . . ." The *Delaware Democrat*, differ-

¹² *Register*, Sept. 12, 1845.

¹³ This quotation and those following are found in the *Register*, Oct. 10, 1845.

ing in politics, could not wish the proprietors success in establishing their principles, but did wish them an abundant pecuniary harvest. The Democratic organ—the *Indiana State Sentinel*—noted that the *Register* is “well got up. . . . In politics, it will probably be of the *Tribune* school.”¹⁴ The *Sentinel* on a later occasion said that Colfax “although a whig of the most violent stamp, we have always been willing to recognize as a gentleman of decided promise.”¹⁵

Colfax thought it necessary to reply editorially to the statement that the *Register* would probably be of the “*Tribune* school.” In so far as the “*Tribune* school” indicated an attachment to Whig principles and an earnest support of Whig candidates the *Register* would strive to emulate its example. “But with the position of the *Tribune* as regards Fourierism and some of the other Reforming views of that paper *we do not concur*. This is well known to Mr. Greeley.”¹⁶

The support given the new journal in St. Joseph and surrounding counties was generous. Starting with a subscription list of some two hundred fifty its circulation quadrupled in a few years. In the spring of 1846, Colfax became sole proprietor. On September 10, 1847, the editor announced an enlargement of the paper and expressed the hope that it would now meet with still greater support. The *Register* was now about the size of the *Indiana State Journal* and the only seven-column paper north of the Wabash Counties. The successful use of the telegraph, expected to come shortly, would, it was thought, make eastern papers, so far as news was concerned, comparatively valueless in the West.¹⁷

Rev. A. Y. Moore, a fellow-townsmen and friend of Colfax, later characterized the *Register* in high terms:

The *Register* was a pure paper. It did not carry the delineations of the revolting and demoralizing scenes of crime into the households it visited. It was the advocate of good things; an earnest, ardent advocate of temperance, and the things that build up society. Many a fine essay worthy of a better fate than ‘alms for oblivion’ is found in its old files. Its selections were of high character, made from the best popular, historical, scientific and literary productions of the press. Sprightly effervescence of genial, intellectual power, gleamed in its editorials. Innumerable letters from its ever-journeying editor, gave the geog-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Oct. 10, 1845.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Sept. 5, 1850.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Oct. 3, 1845.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Sept. 10, 1847; Apr. 17, 1846; A. Y. Moore, *Life of Colfax*, 37; Holister, p. 41.

raphy, statistics, politics and history of different portions of the country.¹⁸

As suggested in this rating, the interest of Colfax in the temperance movement was not a mere youthful flash in the pan. Not a little space in the paper was given to it. Colfax himself became secretary of a County Total Abstinence Society.¹⁹ His editorial interests were quite broad, however. As was the case with the typical newspaper of the times, subjects of current interest and discussion found their way into the columns of the *Register*. A matter of concern was internal improvements, railroads in particular. The South Bend editor not only fought for what he wanted with his pen, but attended conventions as well. One such was the River and Harbor Convention held in Chicago on July 5-6, 1847. Colfax was made the principal secretary of the Convention, an office he frequently held in the conventions that he attended. Included among the speakers were Edward Bates of Missouri and Abraham Lincoln of Illinois. If Colfax had succeeded, the resolutions passed would have been even more unequivocally in favor of expenditures on internal improvements than those which were accepted.²⁰

In the fall of 1847, Colfax found time to go to Indianapolis and stand as a candidate for Clerk of the House of Representatives. His editorial correspondence while on this as on other trips away from South Bend is of interest to the historian. One paragraph in his first letter describes his trip to the capital. Commenting on the trials to be undergone in traveling over the "delectable" Michigan road, he wrote:

Of course I was not exempt from the usual fate of those adventurous mortals who almost tempt Providence to punish them for risking themselves upon it [Michigan Road]. But, after the usual quantum of joltings, borne with the uncomplaining fortitude of a stoic, tho' not with the unruffled placidity of one of Fox's Martyrs, I reached the great city of Indiana last Saturday with bones whole, though weary, and with appetite not diminished by the dangers of mud, chuck-holes and corduroys through which I had safely passed.²¹

In a House very closely divided politically, Colfax failed of election. He attributed his defeat, which he himself fore-

¹⁸ Moore, *op. cit.*, 37.

¹⁹ *Register*, Feb. 22, 1847.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, July 9, 1847; Colfax to Mrs. Colfax (n.d.), quoted in Hollister, 42.

²¹ *Register*, Dec. 1, 1847.

saw, to the fact that his locality was so far north, to the fact that he refused "most obstinately" to accept any of the bargains urged on him by the Democrats, and to the refusal of some Democrats to support him as he had expected. He thought also that it was a strategic mistake for four-fifths of the Whigs to vote for him on the first ballot.²² He remained in Indianapolis during most of the session, however, serving again as reporter for the *Indiana State Journal* as on several previous occasions. It seems that Colfax enjoyed these contacts with the leading men of the state and no doubt used them to good political advantage. But because of a smallpox scare among the legislators he found himself back at his editorial duties in South Bend sooner than he had anticipated. One of the legislators, Hon. Andrew Kennedy, of Muncie, became ill with the smallpox, but before the nature of his illness was known many of the other legislators had visited him in his sick room. When the truth became known something akin to panic struck the legislators and there followed a rather hasty and undignified retreat in every direction.²³ While in Indianapolis, Colfax was urged to buy the *Tippecanoe Journal* which was then for sale. Shortly thereafter he had an opportunity to join Caleb B. Smith and John D. Defrees in purchasing the *Cincinnati Gazette*. But, attached to South Bend, he preferred to remain there.²⁴

The position which Colfax took on the issues growing out of the Mexican War need not be gone into at great length for his position is not surprising. It was what one would expect of a northern Whig. In September, 1845, he thought President Polk's course "judicious and moderate" in the main, and believed war not very likely. Yet he had fears that the President would not be able to withstand the "spirit of the age"—a spirit of mobs, of bloodspilling, of ravage and of war."²⁵ After war broke out, the tone of the *Register* editorials changed. Colfax contended that the war was due to the annexation of Texas, and then inconsistently added that if reason had even afterwards been listened to and followed the war could still have been prevented. Now that the United States was in it, he was for supporting it. But his support was something like that which many northern

²² *Ibid.*, Dec. 1, 1847, Dec. 17, 1847; Hollister, p. 43.

²³ *Register*, Dec. 24, 1847, Dec. 31, 1847.

²⁴ Hollister, 44.

²⁵ *Register*, Sept. 12, 1845.

Democrats gave the Lincoln administration in prosecuting the Civil War. Indeed the parallel has ironic similarity. Colfax pursued a course in the first war which he vigorously denounced in the second. Democratic papers turned on the Whigs for their alleged treason. The Goshen *Democrat*, for example, asked the following question: "Why have the *National Intelligencer*, the *Tribune* and other Whig prints down to their halting echoes, the South Bend *Register* and the Kosciusko *Republican*, arrayed themselves against their country, and hugged their treason to their rotten hearts, until they have become the scorn and contempt of every man who deserves the name of an American citizen?"²⁶ The *Democrat* speaking later of the *Register* in particular declared to the editor that "your readers are well aware that your exertions in behalf (of) the Mexican party here, as well as in Mexico, have met their entire approbation."²⁷ The *Register* remarked that it would not use such billingsgate in reply but repelled the charge of disloyalty on the part of the Whigs saying "every pulsation of our heart is *for* our country."²⁸

The columns of the *Register* reflect the renewed discussion of slavery which came with the war. No one, said the editor, desired more than he to see the day when there would not be a slave in America. "But we constantly notice with sincere [*sic*] regret . . . that the ultra stand taken and ultra measures proposed by citizens of the North, banded together into a political party for this single object (abolishing slavery), are throwing obstacles into the way which it will be difficult, if not impossible, to surmount." He thought the political abolitionists, if sincere, would temper their plans "with moderation instead of ultraism."²⁹

But Colfax was adamant on the further extension of slave territory. The cry of the North, he said, should be: "Not another inch of Slave territory." He praised the House of Representatives which passed the Wilmot Proviso as being true to the impulses of freedom. If the slaveholding states, he held, were girdled with a belt of freedom it would in time mean the death of the "peculiar institution."³⁰

As the presidential campaign approached, the editorials of the *Register* reflect some indecision on the part of the

²⁶ Quoted in *Register*, Jan. 22, 1847.

²⁷ *Goshen Democrat*, May 26, 1847.

²⁸ *Register*, Jan. 22, 1847.

²⁹ *Register*, Apr. 17, 1846.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Feb. 26, 1847.

editor as to whether "noble Harry" (Clay) should be supported or whether some more available candidate ought to be nominated. Colfax had been sure that the country had disgraced itself in 1844 when it refused to elect Clay, the idol of his heart. But, while Clay, whose praises the *Register* could not sound too strongly, was clearly the first choice if he could be elected, Colfax perceived that the Mexican War might be helping the Whigs to solve their nomination problem in 1848. Various favorable articles and editorials about General Taylor were published long before the Whig National Convention of 1848. However, the failure of Taylor to come out in no uncertain terms as a thorough-going Whig cooled Colfax's ardor somewhat as it did that of some others. Some of the friends of Colfax wrote him that Taylor should not be the Whig nominee. John D. Defrees, for example, argued that "Henry Clay cannot be nominated or elected, and General Zachary Taylor ought not to be, because he will not pledge himself to carry out Whig principles if elected."³¹ Horace Greeley wrote in April, 1848, that Clay was the man who ought to be nominated. "We cannot with any decency support Taylor. . . . I cannot bear the thought of Taylor."³²

On the eve of the Whig National Convention the *Register* began to play up General Winfield Scott as a desirable candidate for the nomination. In the convention, to which Colfax was a delegate and one of the secretaries, he supported Scott as against Clay, Webster and Taylor.³³ But, party regular that he was, he did not hesitate, like some of his friends, to support the nominee of the Convention. Since February, 1847, the *Register* had carried at the head of its editorial page the announcement that it was for the nominees of the Whig National Convention for President and Vice President. It could not well change its position now. The paper was filled with sketches and editorials of the glorious deeds of "Old Rough and Ready" and before long he had grown to the proportions of a great candidate.³⁴ In order to spread still more widely the Whig gospel, the rates of the *Register* were reduced for the campaign.

Colfax winced somewhat under charges of supporting a

³¹ Defrees to Colfax, May 2, 1848, quoted in Don Knight, "Political Career of Schuyler Colfax," 7-8. (Master's thesis at the University of Chicago). See also letters of Godlove S. Orth to Colfax, May 9, 1847, Apr. 29, 1848, Orth Mss., Ind. State Library.

³² Quoted in Knight, *op. cit.*, 8; see also Hollister, 45.

³³ *Ibid.*, 52; *Register*, May 26, 1848.

³⁴ See *Register*, June 16, 1848 and June 28, 1848.

slave-holder for the presidency, particularly one who had not been more pronounced in his Whiggery. But he doubted the sincerity of Van Buren, the Free Soil candidate, and thought his past was against him. He said Taylor would not veto any anti-slavery legislation.³⁵ Greeley had considerable difficulty in coming out for Taylor. When he did so, Colfax was happy to receive the news. He thought if Greeley could support him, others disappointed in the nomination surely could.³⁶ He appealed to Free Soilers not to waste their votes on Van Buren.³⁷

Delighted at the outcome of the election, the *Register* continued to support Taylor while President. When in 1849-1850, Northern Democrats were flirting with Free Soilism the editor termed the latter movement a mere dragnet for Locofocoism.³⁸ Colfax seems to have had confidence that the administration could be trusted in solving the question of slavery in the territories. But when Henry Clay introduced his compromise resolutions in 1850, this Whig admirer of "Noble Harry" had to announce that

coinciding, as we generally have with their distinguished author in the prominent political actions of his life for many years past, we feel the more regret that we cannot, in this instance, agree with him in the position he has taken. . . . Whether this glorious Union is, or is not, at last to be wrecked upon the rocks around us—with men of principle, Honor must be preserved. And in our poor judgment, these resolutions are the olive branch to the South but the hyssop to the North.³⁹

One week later the *Register* was still more decided against the resolutions.⁴⁰ Some northern Democrats apparently enjoyed the dilemma in which Northern Whigs with free-soil tendencies now found themselves. In an editorial tilt with E.W.H. Ellis of the Goshen *Democrat*, which now seemed to be more strongly anti-slavery than many northern Whig journals, Colfax accused the former of instability on the slavery question. Ellis stated that such as he was "would be the entire Whig party were it not that they have old Zack, a slave driver of Louisiana, with three hundred slaves, for

³⁵ *Register*, Aug. 17, 1848. This was a stand taken generally by all northern Whig leaders who were regular.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Oct. 12, 1848. But Greeley's support of the ticket was only half-hearted. Greeley wrote Colfax in September: "You needn't ask me to do anymore than I am doing for Taylor. I do all I have stomach for. Let him whose digestion is ranker do more." Quoted in Hollister, 53.

³⁷ *Register*, Oct. 12, 1848.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, July 12, 1849.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Feb. 7, 1850.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Feb. 14, 1850.

President, and Henry Clay, a slaveholder of Kentucky, for their dictator, law giver, and master. And so would Schuyler Colfax, if he had nerve enough to express sentiments antagonistic [*sic*], to those of the 'Great Embodiment of Whiggery,' Henry Clay, or his scintillation, Horace Greeley."⁴¹ As already seen, Colfax was now expressing strong dissent from Clay. And when Clay saw fit to censure the President for advancing a plan of his own instead of supporting the compromise, the dissent of the *Register* was still more marked.⁴²

It was in the midst of the struggle over the compromise measures of 1850 that President Taylor died. "At such a crisis as this," said Colfax in the *Register*, "it is difficult to acquiesce in the will of Providence." He thought Fillmore would prove no Tyler but he was nevertheless somewhat disturbed.⁴³ But with the adoption of the compromise measures and in line with the comparative calm which followed, Colfax too expressed moderate sentiments and became for a while pretty much of a "finality Whig."

In the meantime Colfax was called to serve in a new capacity—that of delegate from his district to the Indiana Constitutional Convention of 1850-1851. This body met in Indianapolis on October 7. For some time before 1850, editorials had appeared in the *Register* defining the editor's position on constitutional questions. He thought the time a good one inasmuch as party strife was not then strong. "There is a happier era of Toleration commenced." No "party will strive to engraft its ultraisms upon it."⁴⁴ He advocated a non-partisan convention including a non-partisan election of delegates but was defeated in this respect.⁴⁵

He issued a circular on constitutional reform stating it was his duty to present his views in order that the people might know his position. In it he noted that although his plan for a non-partisan convention was not adopted he promised nevertheless to recognize its spirit. He was of the opinion that the constitution should be brief—"an instrument of principles rather than of laws." In order to protect the family and unfortunate debtors, homesteads, he held, should be exempt from seizure. Judges, as well as other officials, should

⁴¹ Quoted in *Register*, Feb. 21, 1850.

⁴² *Ibid.*, June 6, 1850.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, June 11, 1850.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Feb. 15, 1849.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Apr. 18, 1850.

be elected. As to state debts he thought the sad experience of the state had taught it that no debt should be incurred without a vote of the people. He was opposed to the doctrine of "no banks," but he was not in favor of giving exclusive banking privileges to one institution. He was, rather, in favor of free banks. The grand jury ought to be retained, he held. He was opposed to granting the right of suffrage to negroes, largely on grounds of expediency, it seems. He was opposed also to forcibly exiling them. Elimination of the "jargons" and "technicalities" of the laws of the state was also favored. "I am in favor of Temperance, and expect to remain so through life," he stated. But he was not in favor of a constitutional provision relative to the policy. Finally, he was in favor of provisions declaring for no slavery, no imprisonment for debt, and no divorces by the legislature. He promised to endeavor, if elected, to justify the confidence placed in him and to "restore your trust to you unsullied."⁴⁶ St. Joseph County must have been satisfied with the position outlined in the circular and in the *Register*; for the editor was successful in his rather brief canvass.

When Colfax arrived at the Capital he reported in his editorial correspondence that Democrats were in control by a large majority. Whigs could not even get one assistant door-keeper appointed, and "There is not the remotest taint of Whiggery in any of the officers from the President to the fireman." To him the political emphasis on things did not augur well for future deliberations.⁴⁷

One of the youngest members of the convention, Colfax took an active part in its work and showed considerable ability as a debater and parliamentarian. He was appointed on the Committees on Currency and Banking and on Public Institutions of the State.⁴⁸ One of the subjects in which Colfax interested himself and on which he debated was that of the rights of negroes. He favored submitting to the people for a separate vote the question whether negroes should be given the right of suffrage. He was willing to let the people decide the issue though he, for reasons satisfactory to himself, would not vote in favor of such a proposition. He thought, too, this

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, July 4, 1850.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Oct. 17, 1850. Many interesting statistics and side lights are given in this editorial correspondence, as is usually the case.

⁴⁸ *Report of the Debates and Proceedings of the Convention*, I, 38 (Hereafter referred to as *Debates*).

might gain some friends for the constitution.⁴⁹ The proposal was obviously unpopular. But the author of it stated that he had learned "to follow where-ever duty leads, regardless of what may be the temporary verdict upon the question, and I shall not shrink here or now from any responsibility I have assumed." The suffrage referendum proposal was voted down by 62 to 60⁵⁰

The proposal to keep free negroes from coming into the state likewise brought forth some oratorical flights on the part of Colfax: "Mr. President, do as we may here, our action is not final. Sooner or later this case will receive a fairer hearing, and calmer consideration at the bar of public opinion. That judgment if we would we cannot escape."⁵¹ He would oppose injustice anywhere whether it emanated from a despot or "from a popular majority which has become lost to sense of right."⁵² In his editorial correspondence he reported that on this question the delegates from the northern tier of counties, regardless of party, voted but one way.⁵³ His views sounded like a rather far cry for that day, but they were nearer fulfillment than was realized at the time.

Exempting homesteads from foreclosure proceedings was another proposal which Colfax warmly defended. In his plea for taking care of the poor because "they have a special claim upon us for our protection" he sounded distinctly modern. The arguments of those who opposed this sounded very much like those used to-day by our alleged reactionaries.⁵⁴

One of the subjects on which the Convention had difficulty in agreeing was that of banking. There were state-bank men, free-bank men and no-bank men. After many efforts Colfax had the satisfaction of contributing considerable in the way of proposing compromise measures which a sufficient number could agree on to adopt. The *State Journal* remarked that "to have been the pacificator of this important measure is certainly creditable to Mr. Colfax, and is evidence of his high standing and influence in the convention."⁵⁵

In assessing the work of the Convention, Colfax concluded there were some things that he would have preferred

⁴⁹ *Debates*, I, 228-30.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 240-2, 253-4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, I, 455-8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, I, 616-17.

⁵³ *Register*, Nov. 21, 1850.

⁵⁴ For his speech on this subject, see *Debates*, I, 747-753.

⁵⁵ Moore, *Life of Colfax*, 50. See also *Debates*, II, 1524, 1621.

to leave out of the Constitution and some things that he would have put in; but on the whole "we look upon it as a valuable Constitution." He would vote cheerfully for its adoption.⁵⁶

Scarcely had Colfax gotten back to his regular editorial duties when he again had extraneous interests to look after. Indeed while in the convention, the question had been broached. A number of his friends suggested that he ought to run for Congress in 1851. In a "strictly, sacredly confidential" letter to a friend in South Bend he asked for advice, and weighed the pros and cons. In favor of it, he thought the position "very honorable" and regarded the pay as "comfortable withal."⁵⁷ Though he wrote in the *Register* on May 1 that the Whig candidate is not as yet agreed upon, he must have had a pretty good idea who he would be, for on May 28, 1851, the district convention nominated him unanimously and praised him for not being an extremist. The resolutions passed admitted that there was a difference among Whigs on the compromise measures of 1850 though all were for obedience to law, and were for carrying them out until "Time and Experience shall show that a Change or Modification of them is necessary to avoid evasion or abuse."⁵⁸

Dr. Graham N. Fitch, then representing the district, was nominated by the Democrats. While the odds seemed against Colfax, he entered vigorously into the canvass, engaging in joint debates with his opponent. Thinking that "propriety, as well as necessity" required that he retire from the editorship of the *Register* during the canvass, Mr. James Davis again became acting-editor.

The differences between the two candidates on the issues of the day were not great. Both parties in the district and both candidates seem to have been influenced by the current emphasis on the finality of the compromise measures as the solution of the slavery issue. A local Anti-Slavery and Free-Soil convention addressed letters to both Colfax and Fitch on the slavery question and received similar replies. Colfax said he could not close his eyes to the right of the southern master to recapture his slave. The Fugitive Slave Law might be unnecessarily harsh but he could not pledge himself to

⁵⁶ *Register*, Feb. 13, 1851.

⁵⁷ Colfax to "friend" at South Bend, Nov. 6, 1850, Heaton Collection, Northern Ind. Hist. Museum, South Bend.

⁵⁸ *Register*, June 5, 1851.

work for the repeal of the law. He hoped that in consequence of judicial decisions the western territories would be free without the necessity of legislation.⁵⁹ In short his position in this period was indeed very moderate. That of Fitch, who in 1849 had, it was said, "out-free-soiled" the Free-Soilers in order to get their votes, was similarly moderate.⁶⁰ The answers of these candidates were not satisfactory to the Free-Soilers. One opposition editor in the district remarked that the Whigs "pretty much 'go the whole hog' on the subject of Fugitiveism and Fillmoreism."⁶¹

This same editor, Ellis of Goshen, twitted the Whig candidate on his youth saying he had better "tarry at Jericho 'till his beard grows."⁶² In one of the first debates with Colfax, Dr. Fitch likewise, it is said, cast aspersion upon Colfax's youth repeating the jibe about tarrying at Jericho. Amid derisive shouts of laughter Fitch retired and Colfax came forward to speak. After looking over the audience he made this retort: "I was not aware, my fellow-citizens, that brass and beard were necessary qualifications of a Congressman. If, in your judgment, it is so, I must renounce all hopes of your votes, as I confess, what you cannot but see, that my competitor has a superabundance of both." On one occasion, Fitch attempted to incite prejudice against his opponent by reminding the audience of Colfax's position in the constitutional convention on the rights of negroes, though it seems there had been an agreement not to mention these matters.⁶³ Colfax in turn mentioned his understanding of the agreement and added that those were his conscientious convictions which he would not give up for a seat in Congress.⁶⁴

On the eve of the election, the *Register* remarked that "no great party issues have been or could be made in this contest, and the election will and must turn on a choice between men."⁶⁵ The choice was Dr. Fitch, though only by about 200 majority. Colfax attributed his defeat to "illegal voting in the Rail Road Counties, and Whig defection in the County of our competitor."⁶⁶ It seems too that President

⁵⁹ *Register*, July 3, 1851.

⁶⁰ *Register*, June 1, 1851, taken from the *LaPorte Whig*; see also *Register*, July 3, 1851.

⁶¹ *Goshen Democrat*, June 4, 1851.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Hollister, 63; Moore, *op. cit.*, 53-4.

⁶⁴ Henry Wilson, *The Rise and Fall of the Slave Power* (Boston, 1872), II, 186.

⁶⁵ July 31, 1851.

⁶⁶ *Register*, Oct. 23, 1851.

Fillmore, for some reason or other, was not very friendly toward the candidacy of Colfax and was not greatly disappointed in the re-election of Dr. Fitch.⁶⁷

In the fall of this same year Colfax was engaged in still another activity outside the journalistic field. Having been an active member of the Odd Fellows fraternal order for some years, he became a leading spirit in the establishing of the Degree of Rebekah, ladies' auxiliary of the order. At the session of the Grand Lodge of the United States in Cincinnati in 1850, Colfax was appointed chairman of a committee to consider the matter and report at the next meeting. He had previously suggested the idea of a *Ladies' Degree*. A majority of the committee was opposed, but the next Grand Lodge adopted the minority report which he made. In the words of one writer, the report "was suggested and originated by Schuyler Colfax . . . by whom also it was written."⁶⁸ "Brother Colfax deserves, as he has received, the sincere thanks of the Fraternity, for this ornament to the building which our fathers framed."⁶⁹

In the meantime, the Whig editor of the *Register* took an early interest in the presidential campaign of 1852. In February of 1851, noting that Indiana Democrats were pushing the presidential fortunes of General Joseph Lane, he reported that the Whigs "believe that the only Lane that is to be President, is old Lundy's Lane, and they have, with a more entire unanimity, "nominated Gen. Scott." Because of Scott's victories "on the frozen soil of Canada as on the burning plains of Mexico," this young Whig editor thought he heard the call strong and clear from every section of the Union to elevate another warrior-statesman to the Presidency.⁷⁰

As in 1848, Colfax was a delegate to the Whig National Convention. He believed Scott to be safe on the slavery issue, and thought that he would not make devotion to the Compromise of 1850 a shibboleth of party faith.⁷¹ He held that Scott should not be pinned down with controversial issues but should be taken on faith as Taylor was four years be-

⁶⁷ Colfax to Fillmore, July 16, 1852, Colfax, Mss., Library of Congress.

⁶⁸ Paschal Donaldson, *The Odd-Fellows Text Book*, p. 213, Philadelphia, 1852.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12 (Introduction); see also *Register* for Sept. 25, 1851 and May 20, 1852.

⁷⁰ *Register*, Feb. 6, 1851, March 13, 1851.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Apr. 1, 1852.

fore.⁷² For a young man, Colfax apparently played quite a leading part in getting Scott nominated. On one point of strategy, he differed with William H. Seward and the other members of the New York delegation. The idea of Colfax was that Scott's letter on the compromise which had been prepared and which was to be given in accepting the nomination should be read first in order to attract some Southern voters.⁷³ He seemed to have been right in this as no delegate south of Delaware came to Scott's support until the letter was read, Scott finally being nominated on the fifty-third ballot. The Whig platform endorsed the compromise measures of 1850 as did that of the Democratic party.⁷⁴

Colfax was active in the campaign. He tried to make the platform as palatable as possible and contended that in any case the North got what was more valuable than the platform, namely, the *candidate*. The price of the *Register* for the campaign was again reduced. All the battles Scott ever engaged in were again re-fought in the pages of the *Register* and gloriously won. He was vigorously defended against all charges including those that said he was a Catholic and that he was a nativist. The Whigs went down in defeat in that election and were never, as events proved, to rise again. Possibly sensing defeat, and remembering the coolness of the President towards him, as evidenced again by a recent removal of his father from the postmastership of South Bend, Colfax turned down a nomination as the Whig candidate for the House of Representatives.⁷⁵ The Whigs nominated Horace P. Biddle who was defeated.

The defeat of Scott was, of course, a keen disappointment to the zealous Whig editor of the South Bend *Register*. He spoke with some bitterness about the conduct of certain Whigs, including a number of the friends of the late Daniel Webster's, who voted for Pierce rather than for Scott. To his subscribers he announced that "the *Register* will, we need scarcely say, remain Whig to the backbone . . . We shall stand by the Whig banner to the last. We shall uphold and defend Whig principles . . ." ⁷⁶ Others might talk of the end of the Whig party, but not Colfax. "We dissent, in the furthest

⁷² *Ibid.*, Apr. 29, 1852.

⁷³ Colfax to Mrs. Colfax, June 15, 1852, quoted in Hollister, 67.

⁷⁴ *Register*, June 24, 1852; Hollister, pp. 66, 68. Colfax voted against adoption.

⁷⁵ W. H. Seward to Colfax, July 31, 1852 and Colfax to Fillmore, July 16, 1852. Colfax Mss., Ind. St. Library.

⁷⁶ *Register*, Nov. 4, 1852.

degree," he wrote in December, "from those in our ranks who since the defeat last month, speak of the Whig party as 'Dead'" He especially regretted seeing the *New York Tribune* taking that stand. The party had passed through more bitter reverses and had come back. It would do so again, so he thought.⁷⁷

Confident in this hope, Colfax preceeded with his journalistic efforts, putting forth an effort to build a better and still larger *Register*. This he did in 1853. He installed a power press, the first in the state outside of Indianapolis, it was said. This journal was now declared to be the largest paper in the state. Its circulation was the largest of any paper in Northern Indiana. The prospectus stated that no new pledges need be given as to its course. Its promise is in its past record. "We have made our paper the reflex of our heart. It will relax not one jot in its attachment to its old faith."⁷⁸

Writing in August, 1853, Colfax referred to the "political calm which happily prevails."⁷⁹ In November an editorial stated "the Whigs are cool, calm, composed—confident that all things will work together correctly for their success in 1856."⁸⁰ Little did the editor realize that a political storm was impending. The Washington correspondent of the *New York Tribune* reported on January 24, 1854 as follows: "It begins to be thought that if Douglas's Nebraska bill is pushed in its present shape it will blow all concerned sky high, and that those from the North who vote for it will have leave to stay at home and hoe cabbages."⁸¹ The struggle over the Nebraska bill aroused in Colfax a more combative spirit than he had thus far manifested. He charged that Douglas had made a "shameful bid for the Presidency" when he violated the sacred compact of 1820. "Whatever others may do, when Congress, seduced by Executive patronage, trammelled by political dictation, forgetful of plighted faith, passes this bill, we enlist under the banner of Repeal. Whether successful or defeated, we will go, with the opponents of this bill, before the People, on an appeal to them from the rec-

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Dec. 23, 1852.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, July 14, 1853; Aug. 11, 1853; Colfax to Darling, Feb. 28, 1853, Colfax Mss., North. Ind. Hist. Museum.

⁷⁹ Aug. 11.

⁸⁰ Nov. 3.

⁸¹ Quoted in *Register*, Feb. 2, 1854.

reancy of their Representatives."⁸² To what extent Colfax was seriously and sincerely distributed by the new turn of affairs as a result of passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill and to what extent he saw the possibility of advancement through this new troubling of the political waters may never be known. Suffice it to say that he became active in the formation of the New People's Party in Indiana, which in a year or two was to become known as the Republican Party. Moderation and the "finality" emphasis were now forgotten. Party regular that he was, he now called for "*An Union of Freeman For The Sake of Freedom.*" All other issues, which need not be given up necessarily, must be subordinated to this one.⁸³ He wrote to a friend that "Whatever else may be our duty in the future, as Butler said at the great New York meeting last week, the North should remember to expunge the expungers."⁸⁴

Suffice it to say, in regard to 1854, that Colfax was selected by the Whigs of his district to run for the House of Representatives. The great issue to Colfax was of course the application of the Wilmot Proviso principle—the necessity of stopping the aggression of the slavocracy. His opponent, Dr. Norman Eddy, the sitting member of Congress, was fighting an up-hill battle. On his way home from Washington after the adjournment of Congress, he is said to have repined to a friend: "Well, I am going home, and a pretty fix I am in!"⁸⁵ Placed on the defensive for his vote for the Nebraska bill, he was defending what was, to the majority of people of the Ninth district, indefensible. Temperance, Know-Nothingism, and anti-Mormonism were minor issues in the campaign. The tidal wave of Anti-Nebraskaism swept Colfax into office by a large majority.⁸⁶

In the following winter and summer, he continued his editorial duties except for the times when he was away from home. Through the *Register* and on the stump he continued to take an active part in the organization of the new party. While getting his bearings in the new party alignment, he seems to have floundered for a brief period in the morass

⁸² *Register*, Feb. 16, 1854.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, June 15, 1854.

⁸⁴ Colfax to Kline Shryock, May 23, 1854, Colfax Mss., Chicago Historical Society Library.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Hollister, p. 76.

⁸⁶ *Register*, Nov. 9, 1854. The majority was 1,766.

of Know-Nothingism.⁸⁷ In November of 1855, Colfax turned his editorial duties over to Mr. Alfred Wheeler, who, a few years later, purchased the *Register*.⁸⁸

Upon receipt of the news of Colfax's victory in the election of 1854, the Goshen *Democrat*, remembering the jibe about Colfax's youth when running for Congress in 1851, now remarked: "He tarries now no longer at Jericho."⁸⁹ And so it was. While South Bend remained his home, Washington was to be the scene of his labors which continued through the stormy days of the Civil War and reconstruction.

⁸⁷ *Register*, June 21, 1855; Carl F. Brand, "History of the Know-Nothing Party in Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* (June, 1922), XVIII, 187-197.

⁸⁸ A copy of the agreement between Colfax and Wheeler is in Colfax Mss., North. Ind. Hist. Museum. See also *Register* for Nov. 22, 1855; also see letters of Colfax to Wheeler Apr. 5, and Apr. 11, 1855, Colfax Mss., Library of Congress.

⁸⁹ Oct. 11, 1854.