

Political Activities of Joseph Rodes Buchanan

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By the end of 1856, Joseph Rodes Buchanan was ready for a change of environment. The events of that year, which had led to the disruption of the Eclectic Institute and the establishment of a rival school, had convinced him that he was "out of his element." He felt that he had been "placed in a false light by appearing as a representative of practical medicine rather than as the promulgator of a new philosophy," and he longed to be away from the scene of his defeats.¹ In addition, for more than five years he had been separated from his family—except perhaps for infrequent visits—because the failing health of his wife, "and other personal reasons," had necessitated their removal to Louisville in July, 1851.² Thus, early in 1857, Buchanan severed his relations with the newly established Eclectic College of Medicine and rejoined his family in Louisville.

He arrived in Louisville just in time to get into the thick of the political strife which grasped Kentucky in the years preceding and during the Civil War. Heretofore Buchanan had taken no part in politics, having regarded politicians as nothing more than a necessary evil; but disappointments in his chosen career, plus his apparent realization of the fact that basic principles were at issue, now prompted him to enter the political arena.

Because of their centralized location, which enabled them to understand better the governmental problems confronting the nation, Kentuckians of 1861 were "the most

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¹ Harvey W. Felter, *History of the Eclectic Medical Institute, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1845-1902* (Cincinnati, 1902), 99.

² "Announcements," *Buchanan's Journal of Man* (6 vols., Cincinnati and Boston, 1849-1856), III (1851), 2. In Cincinnati the Buchanan family had lived in the old Lytle home, one of the most historic houses in the city. The house, belonging to the family of Mrs. Buchanan's mother, was torn down many years ago, but it is said that at one time the D.A.R. offered fifty thousand dollars for the purchase of it in order to preserve it as a shrine. Mrs. Henry B. Howry to the author, Louisville, Kentucky, March 14, 1949.

Constitution-abiding and peaceable of all Americans."³ But by the logic of events, "it was only a few months before the one issue in Kentucky became union or secession. Every election from 1861 to 1864 hinged on that question . . . , whatever the office to be filled might be."⁴ To thinking Kentuckians, Civil War meant the direst of calamities, for they were on good terms with their northern neighbors, and had no means of defending the Ohio River line in case of war with them.⁵ But there were others in the state to whom the institution of slavery was more sacred than the Union, and who apparently did not realize the consequences of secession. Thus the die was cast for conflict between the two groups.

Humanitarian that he was, Buchanan was fundamentally opposed to slavery, and he quickly lined up with the anti-secession group. As early as 1849 he had taken his stand on the slavery issue, when he applauded the gradual emancipation plan proposed by Henry Clay. Though he took issue with several points of the Clay plan, he was glad to see that emancipation was receiving the consideration of statesmen, and he hoped to see the day "when our National authorities and State governments shall all regard it as the great end of government to secure the happiness and full educational development of *every human being* under their control, of all ages and sexes, colors, conditions, and characters."⁶

Just how soon after his return to Louisville Buchanan began to take part in Kentucky's political affairs is not

³ Mary Scrugham, "The Peaceable Americans of 1860-1861," in Columbia University *Studies in History, Economics and Public Law* (New York, 1891-), XCVI (1921), 421.

⁴ James R. Robertson, "Sectionalism in Kentucky from 1855 to 1865," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1914-), IV (1917-1918), 59.

⁵ Scrugham, "The Peaceable Americans," in Columbia University *Studies in History, Economics and Public Law*, XCVI, 519-20.

⁶ "Familiar Table Talk," *Buchanan's Journal of Man*, I (1849), 138. Buchanan differed with Clay in that: (1) he did not consider colonization essential, though he would favor it if it would prevent a political conflict between the two races; (2) he did not think it necessary to prolong slavery longer than to the age of eighteen, or possibly twenty-one (Clay recommended twenty-five); and (3) he thought the mere emancipation and colonization of the Negro wholly insufficient. "If the negro is to be restored at last to his rights," he said, "let it be done fully and freely; let him be elevated to the proper level of a freeman, by a solid education, which shall qualify him for self-government, and enable him, if he returns to Africa, to carry with him civilization, freedom, science, art, and all the elements of happiness." *Ibid.* By 1852 he had concluded that separation of the two races was a necessity. *Ibid.*, III, 31.

revealed. But by 1863 he had become sufficiently established to seek election to the United States Congress. Campaigning under the banner of the Peace party, he was unsuccessful in this venture. But not to be outdone, he joined the ranks of the regular Democratic party, rapidly advanced to a position of leadership in that organization, and late in 1863—or early in 1864—was elected chairman of the Democratic State Central Committee.⁷

One of Buchanan's first acts in his new position was to call a state convention, which met at Frankfort on February 18, 1864. Two hundred delegates, representing forty counties, met to make nominations for the various state offices, but after six resolutions "embodying the views of this meeting" had been drawn up Colonel E. A. Gilbert, commander of the Union forces at Frankfort, disbanded the convention and ordered the delegates home. Dr. A. B. Chambers promptly presented the six resolutions to Colonel Gilbert, but the latter refused to let them be read and said positively that "the convention must not be holden [*sic*]"; he did, however, retain a list of the delegates, remarking that "it might be of great importance." Buchanan probably attended this convention, though no record of his presence has been found. At any rate, his name was one of those appearing on a resolution which was presented to the Kentucky House of Representatives on the following day, requesting the adoption "of such legislation as will best conserve the constitutional right of citizens peacefully to assemble together, the right of suffrage, and the right of free speech, and protect the citizens from military violence."⁸ The resolution was rejected, thus setting the stage for further coercion.

With the approach of the presidential campaign of 1864 the Democrats of Kentucky made preparations for their representation at the national convention. Among the delegates elected were John W. Leathers, from the Covington

⁷ H. A. Kelly and W. L. Burrage, *Dictionary of American Medical Biographies* (New York, 1928), 163; Ernest S. Bates, "Joseph Rodes Buchanan," *Dictionary of American Biography* (20 vols., New York, 1943), III, 217. Buchanan was equally opposed to secession and to war, and even after the former had become an accomplished fact he still sought to prevent, and later to end, war. *Louisville Past and Present: Its Industrial History* (Louisville, 1875), 175.

⁸ Lewis Collins, *History of Kentucky* (2 vols., Louisville, 1924), I, 119, 120.

district, and Buchanan, from the state at large. The convention was scheduled to meet in Chicago on August 29. On August 2 both Buchanan and Leathers were arrested, apparently without charge. Deprived of seeing his friends or lawyers, and robbed of his papers "referring to the credentials of the Kentucky delegates to the Chicago convention,"⁹ Buchanan remained in the federal prison at Louisville until after the work of the convention had been completed.

On hand when the convention opened, however, was Kentucky's former Governor Charles A. Wickliffe, bearing letters from both Buchanan and Leathers to explain their absence. According to his letter, which was promptly read before the convention, Buchanan had been arrested "upon vague suspicions," and he declared that he was guilty of no crime "but devotion to democracy and abhorrence of war." He noted that many of Kentucky's most prominent citizens continued to be spirited away and secretly confined, and asserted his belief that it was all a part of Mr. Lincoln's bold schemes for the perpetuation of his despotism, by the aid of a fictitious vote in Kentucky and other border states. There is no freedom of election in Kentucky but by *gracious permission*. The life, liberty and property of every citizen are at the mercy of the President and his subordinates. It is customary with them to pronounce every man disloyal who is opposed to Mr. Lincoln, and to the continuance of the present ferocious war."¹⁰ He then concluded by urging the national convention to take a firm stand against these practices of the administration.

The letters were tabled and Wickliffe took the floor to reveal his knowledge of conditions in Kentucky. Many of the state's most loyal citizens, among them twenty or thirty ladies, he declared, were at that time imprisoned, by the military forces in Louisville, "in damp and dirty cells, with

⁹ *Ibid.*, 139; *Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention Held in 1864 in Chicago* (Chicago, 1864), 7-8. The arrest of Buchanan, and other leading citizens, was ordered by General Burbridge, acting under the instruction of General Sherman, "and partly upon Gen. Carrington's information to Gov. O. P. Morton, of Indiana." Collins, *History of Kentucky*, I, 137. Just how the information of Indiana's governor was connected with the situation in Kentucky is not revealed.

¹⁰ *Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention Held in 1864 in Chicago*, 7-8. See also, *The Crisis* (10 vols., Columbus, Ohio, 1861-1871), IV (1864-1865), 258.

only straw to lie upon, and the coarsest fare"; local newspapers were "forbidden to make the slightest allusion to this terrible state of affairs." In regard to these charges Dr. E. O. Brown, surgeon in charge of the prison, subsequently "denied that the female prisoners are confined in 'damp, dark, and filthy cells,' " but he did not deny that male prisoners were poorly situated.¹¹

Buchanan's imprisonment and his letter to the convention, however, had no apparent effect on the proceedings of the Democratic organization. The convention continued with its work in the usual manner, nominated its candidate, and adjourned on August 31, while Buchanan and his political cohorts remained in the unsavory prison a few more weeks and finally were dismissed sometime in September.

Following his release from prison, Buchanan continued to guide the policy of his party in Kentucky in "a wise and conservative manner." In May, 1866, contrary to the wishes of the leading politicians of the state, he called another state convention, which resulted in the re-establishment of the party in power. The favorable results of this action were so appreciated by Buchanan's friends that they urged him to run for governor of the state. But, "believing that his proper vocation was not in politics," he declined the request and, in addition, resigned his position as chairman of the state organization.¹²

There is no record of how Buchanan occupied the time not devoted to politics during the years from 1856 to 1866. One writer has said that from 1856 to 1861 he devoted himself mainly to the care of "his family and property" in Louisville. The family mentioned consisted of his wife— who for several years had been in poor health, and therefore probably required a good deal of his attention—and four children.¹³ But

¹¹ Collins, *History of Kentucky*, I, 139.

¹² *Louisville Past and Present*, 175. See also, *Biographical Encyclopedia of Kentucky* (Cincinnati, 1878), 653. A local cartoon represented Buchanan with a huge mortar and pestle, coat tails flying, over the caption: "Dr. Buchanan, chief cook and Bottle-Washer of the Democratic Party." Mrs. Henry B. Howry to the author, Louisville, Kentucky, March 14, 1949.

¹³ *Biographical Encyclopedia of Kentucky*, 653. The four children were: Rowan and Lytle Buchanan, both of whom became lawyers and practiced in Louisville; Anselan, who was an Episcopal minister; and Alice Wakefield Buchanan, who married Samuel E. Weynall of Bourbon County, Kentucky, and moved to Kansas City, Missouri. Lytle married

of the nature of Buchanan's property in Louisville nothing has been found. Quite likely he owned his home, though frequent references to his residence would seem to indicate otherwise; but whether he possessed any rental or business property is merely a matter of speculation. In order to support a family of five, however, he must have had some source of income during the years that he was not employed as a teacher, and the fact that Judge John Rowan was quite wealthy leads to the suggestion that Mrs. Buchanan may have inherited some property in Louisville.

It is also possible that Buchanan devoted a part of his time during these years to experiments in mechanical science. Like his father, he had always been interested in new inventions, and occasionally he tried his hand at the art. In 1849, while discussing the various proposals for a trans-continental railroad, he questioned whether, in the future, "the line of quickest travel will be on solid iron rails . . . or whether it will be THROUGH THE AIR!" Continuing this line of thought, he wrote: "For my own part, I do not believe the air line of travel impossible, even without the wire-way to guide it, and the balloon to support it. It is only requisite that we obtain a sufficient amount of power in proportion to the weight of machinery employed. *Such an apparatus, capable of generating the necessary power for an aerial flight, I have invented some years since.* It is possible that I may find time and means to put the invention into operation. It is needless to say, that, for such a purpose, a much more efficient power than steam or galvanism will be required—a power which may be dangerous, if not carefully guarded by strong apparatus.

"Such machinery I have invented: the principles are simple enough, and if my own machinery should not be executed, I doubt not that others will grasp the same idea, and that in a few years more, aerial navigation will be as common-place a fact as the magnetic telegraph."¹⁴

It cannot be denied that Buchanan called this one right; and it would be of interest to know the nature of this appara-

Mary Houston of Louisville, and Anselan married Willia Thompson, also of Louisville. Rowan remained a bachelor. Mrs. Henry B. Howry to the author, Bartlesville, Oklahoma, July 8, 1949.

¹⁴ "Our Destiny," *Buchanan's Journal of Man*, I, 128-29. The italics are the writer's.

tus and mode of power that he had devised, but apparently no record of it, other than that quoted above, has been left.

But whatever other activities may have held his attention during his sojourn in Louisville, the rigors of political life were too demanding for the restless, exploring nature of the neurologist. For ten years he had been separated from the things dearest to him—teaching and research;¹⁵ no doubt he longed for the lecture room and the rostrum, and it is more than remarkable that one of his nature remained for so long separated from these things. Thus, soon after resigning his chairmanship of the Democratic Central Committee of Kentucky, Buchanan was on the move once more, and for the second time he decided to try his fortunes in the East.

¹⁵ It is probable that he continued his research and experimental work during this period, but there is no record of such.