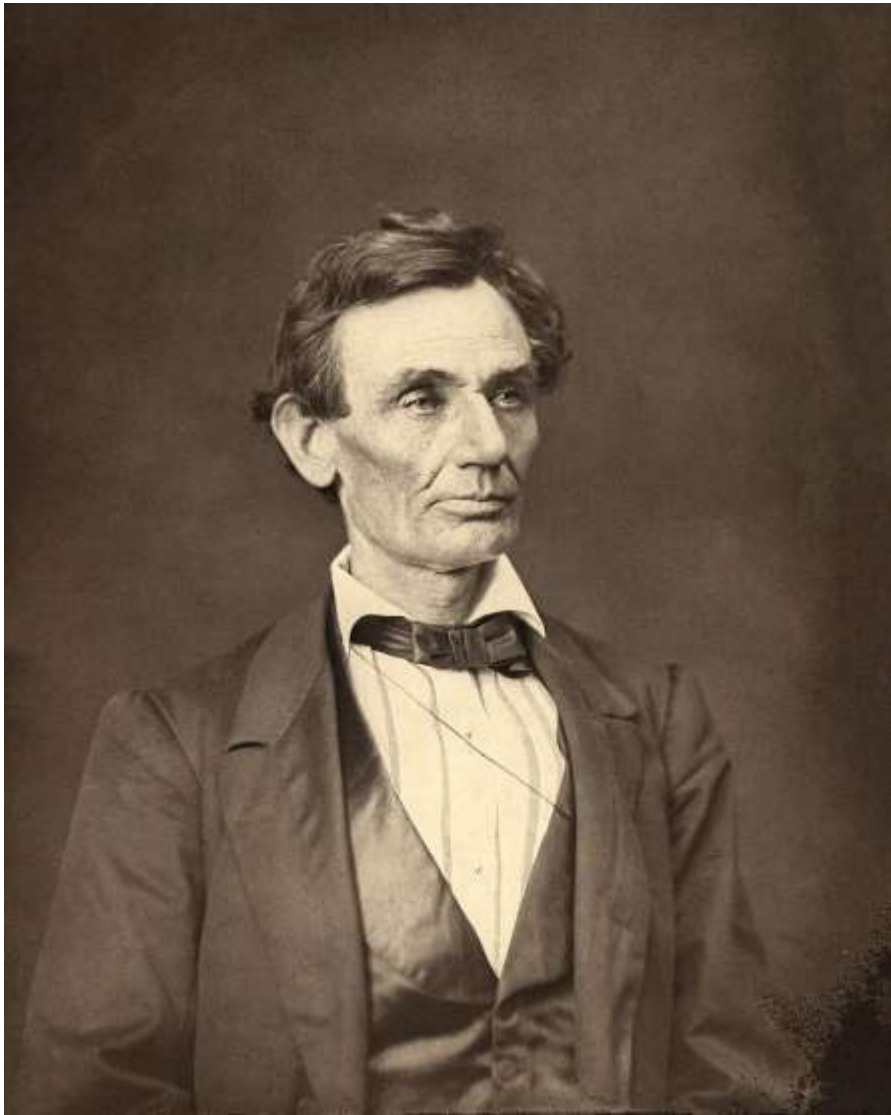


Abraham Lincoln's Surprise 1860 Republican Nomination

By David J. Kent



(Library of Congress)

The 1860 Republican Nominee

(Editor's note: This article concludes David J. Kent's four-part series on Lincoln in New England. However, to learn more of Lincoln's travels in that area, see David's most recent publication: *Lincoln in New England: In Search of His Forgotten Tours*.

For over two weeks spanning the end of February through mid-March, Abraham Lincoln had been touring the Northeast speaking on behalf of the Republican Party. His February 27 speech at Cooper Union would become an iconic landmark in the great man's life. The eleven additional speeches he presented in the New England states of Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Connecticut are less remembered. But did the New England tour make a difference?

Lincoln's presidential nomination at the 1860 Republican Convention took many by surprise. For months, perhaps years, New York Senator William Henry Seward was expected to be the party's nominee for the general election. Seward and his political guru, Thurlow Weed, certainly thought so. Among other states they felt were for him, they expected that the nearby New England states would support him as well. The result of balloting proves that they should not have been so complacent.

The signs were there. Lincoln had done the number crunching, examining all the states that Republican nominee John C. Frémont failed to win in 1856. Realizing that the sectional nature of the Republican Party meant the nominee would have to capture the Frémont states plus Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, California, and the new state of Oregon, Lincoln calculated that Seward was likely to fall short. That opened the possibility of an alternative candidate, perhaps himself, which made his upcoming trip to Cooper Union critical. Many historians have credited that speech, along with the Mathew Brady photograph he had taken that day, with making Lincoln president.

Lincoln's plan was simply to visit his son Robert at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire after Cooper Union. Before leaving New York City, however, he had committed to give a speech in Providence, Rhode Island. The requests to speak steamrolled until, in the end, he gave eleven speeches before finally making his way back home, exhausted but now firmly placed in the minds of many as a viable nominee.

The speeches in New England gave Lincoln valuable insight into the type of candidate that could leapfrog Seward. His invitation to Cooper Union was organized by influential political leaders who sought a Seward alternative, although many—including *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley, still nursing a personal grudge against Seward and Weed—saw that alternative in someone like former Representative Edward Bates of Missouri. Lincoln's speech impressed the men enough to leave a lasting, positive impression. Similar dynamics occurred with the political leaders Lincoln met at each stop in the three New England states. Several of his New England hosts introduced him as vice presidential material, with at least one suggesting he was "the next President of the United States." On his return trip to New York, Cooper Union organizer James Briggs told Lincoln that "I think your chance of being the next President is equal to that of any man in our country." Not long after he returned to Springfield, he replied to an Ohio businessman who had suggested that the Ohio legislature support Lincoln as the Republican nominee. It is in this letter where Lincoln first voices the idea that he is likely not the first choice of a very great many (those going to Seward, Chase, Bates, or a given state's native son) and thus "our policy, then, is to give no offence to others—leave them in a mood to come to us, if they shall be compelled to give up their first love."

So, how did the New England states vote in the Republican Convention in Chicago? Unlike Seward's people, Lincoln and his political supporters led by Judge David Davis were anything but complacent. Davis arrived early at the convention and masterfully orchestrated the outreach campaign to other states. He carefully selected which supporters would speak with specific states, sending, for example, Maine-born-and-raised Leonard Swett to chat with the Maine contingent. It helped that many of the delegates were the very same political leaders Lincoln had met two months earlier on his New England speaking tour. For instance, future Secretary of the

Navy Gideon Welles had spent time with Lincoln in Connecticut, and while he felt obligated to vote for Salmon P. Chase, he put in a good word to other New England delegates for the man from Illinois. Other people Lincoln met in New England remembered him and stood for him against Seward when the voting finally began.

Voting in the convention proceeded from East to West, which meant Maine went first. Seward had counted on all New England supporting his candidacy, so there was no surprise when Maine gave ten of its sixteen votes to Seward. But then Maine gave its other six votes to Lincoln, which shocked many in the room. Apparently, Swett's chat had done some good. Then New Hampshire gave seven of its ten votes to Lincoln and only one to Seward, giving Lincoln an additional two votes on the second and third ballots. Vermont gave all its ten votes to native son Jacob Collamer on the first ballot but switched all ten to Lincoln on the second and third ballots. The other three states also gave Lincoln a portion of their votes on the first ballot, shifting more on the second and still more on the third. Combined with the expected support of Illinois and Illinois, plus unexpected support from Kentucky, Virginia, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, it positioned Lincoln as the clear sole alternative to Seward. Huge jumps away from native sons to Lincoln on the second and third ballots in Pennsylvania and Ohio sealed the deal.

By voting first, the New England support gave tacit permission to other states during the convention to vote for Lincoln, helping to create an aura of inevitability after the first ballot. Many New Englanders, including close Seward friend and convention vice presidential choice Hannibal Hamlin (who was in Maine and not a delegate), thought someone other than Seward would have a better chance in the general election. While they may not have had Lincoln in mind as the presumed alternative, the memory of Lincoln's travels in New England and the order of voting played a significant role in enhancing Lincoln's chances.

New England strongly supported Lincoln in the general election along with the Ohio Valley and northern states, capturing all the states Fremont had failed to get in 1856, as well as the far western states of California and Oregon. Many New Englanders would play important roles during the war, including Gideon Welles, Henry Wilson, Charles Sumner, Justin Morrill, Benjamin Butler, Massachusetts Governor John Andrew, and Connecticut Governor William Buckingham. New England would go on to strongly support Lincoln's reelection in 1864.

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And a few words on our featured photo of Lincoln as the Republican presidential nominee: Photographer Alexander Hesler took four photos of Lincoln in a single sitting on June 3, 1860, shortly after Lincoln became the presidential nominee of the Republican Party. When Lincoln saw this photograph, along with his side-view portrait from the same sitting, he remarked, "That looks better and expresses me better than any I have ever seen; if it pleases the people I am satisfied." His law partner William Herndon wrote of this picture: "There is the peculiar curve of the lower lip, the lone mole on the right cheek, and a pose of the head so essentially Lincolnian; no other artist has ever caught it."