

Abraham Lincoln's Two Tours of New England: Part 1 – 1848

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The Whig Party of 1848 faced a dilemma. Their standard-bearer, Henry Clay, was the likely frontrunner to reprise his role as the Whig presidential nominee. But there were concerns with the aging patriarch, not the least of which was that as a major party nominee for president in 1824, 1832, and 1844, he lost each time. Ever the vote counter, Abraham Lincoln wrote a friend that “Mr. Clay’s chance for an election, is just no chance at all,” going on to enumerate which states Clay could not carry. Based on his read of public sentiment, Lincoln noted, “in my judgment, we can elect nobody but Gen. Taylor.”¹ With support from Lincoln and many others, Zachary Taylor became the Whig nominee in what would turn out to be a pivotal presidential election.

Taylor’s nomination led to the first of Lincoln’s two ventures into New England, both largely forgotten yet immensely significant – for Lincoln personally and for the nation. The first was a prelude to his own greatness. The second, a prelude to Civil War. This current paper will dive into his 1848 trip, which took him to Massachusetts. A subsequent paper will examine his 1860 post-Cooper Union tour through Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Connecticut. Both visits were crucial to the nation’s march toward civil war, and yet have been habitually overlooked by history.

Zachary Taylor is a Whig?

In December 1847, freshman congressman Abraham Lincoln told his law partner William Herndon that he planned to “distinguish” himself with a little speech. Newly minted members of the House of Representatives are typically expected to keep quiet and vote as their party tells them. But the lanky Illinoisan with the homely visage and awkward movements was not one to hold his tongue when he felt an injustice had been perpetrated on the American people. Lincoln took to the House podium to introduce a series of resolutions demanding that Democratic President James K. Polk identify the exact spot where Mexican troops had crossed into United States territory. Disbelieving the president’s tale of Mexican intrusion, Lincoln wanted to know “whether the spot on which the blood of our citizens was shed...was or was not within the territory of Spain (i.e., Mexico).”² His statements would cause him problems at home later, but at the time he was roundly ignored by Polk, the Democrats, and even most of the elites in his own party.

Lincoln’s first session in the 30th Congress had been a whirlwind of personal and national activity. Gold had been found at Sutter’s Mill in January, setting off the Gold Rush that turbo-charged the race to make California a state, in doing so reigniting the slavery conflict to be “resolved” by the Compromise of 1850. January also saw the establishment of the Washington Monument project, whose groundbreaking Lincoln attended on the Fourth of July. In February, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, officially ending the Mexican American War and gaining the United States nearly a million square miles of new territory. Later that month,

Lincoln was present when former president John Quincy Adams, now a congressman representing Massachusetts, suffered a fatal stroke in the House chambers. Wisconsin became the thirtieth state to enter the Union in May. Lincoln's first session of Congress ended on August 14, 1848, and Lincoln was eager to get home to his family and law practice in Springfield for the few months before the next congressional session began.

The Illinois Whig State Committee had other ideas. They appointed him Assistant Taylor Elector-at-Large with the stipulation that he "take the stump, and labor industriously in the cause of 'Old Rough and Ready,' from now until November next."³ Instead of boarding a train home, Lincoln obediently sat in the "Whig document room" mailing out campaign material. If Lincoln had spent many a day telling jokes in the House post office, now he was using his franking privileges to promote Taylor as the next great Whig leader.⁴ Electing Taylor was critical to the Whigs and there were rumblings that New England was not happy with the choice, so the party decided to send Lincoln to Massachusetts to help make the case.

It was not an easy case to make. Many Whigs were not convinced Taylor was one of them. After all, his biggest claim to fame was that he was the hero of Buena Vista in the Mexican War. The same Mexican war that Lincoln has challenged with his "spot" resolutions. The war that the Whigs had "very generally opposed," believing it "unnecessarily and unconstitutionally commenced by the President."⁵ Taylor was also a Southern plantation owner enslaving hundreds of African Americans. Were not the Whigs supposed to be against slavery, or at least the expansion of it? Taylor himself had been rather apolitical, but would he support Whig principles?

Taylor was a slaveholder but nevertheless was not a fan of expanding slavery into the western territories, now doubled in size. With both parties vying for him to lead their ticket, Taylor at first said he would only agree if he could do so "untrammelled with party obligations or interests of any kind," the sort of divine elevation that George Washington had enjoyed after the Revolutionary War.⁶ Both the Whigs and Democrats quickly disavowed him of that politically naïve delusion. He agreed to sign on with the Whigs, finding them slightly less objectionable than the conservative Democrats of the South.

Off to Massachusetts

Lincoln gave speeches in nine eastern Massachusetts cities over a period of twelve days in September 1848, less than two months before the presidential election. Ostensibly, he was there to promote Taylor and dismiss the Democratic nominee, Michigan Senator Lewis Cass. More importantly – after all, Massachusetts was largely a safe Whig state – his assignment was to recapture wayward Whigs who had splintered off to form the Free Soil Party. While traveling the Bay State he would encounter more ruptures in the Whig Party and a growing radical movement with a potential to split the country.

His first stop was Worcester, west of Boston and the site of the state's Whig convention. The city was also the center of the state's Free Soilers, who were adamant that the selection of the war hero/slaveholder Taylor proved the Whig Party had lost its way. Joining with the remnants of the Liberty Party (an earlier Whig splinter group) and the "Barnburners" (a faction of the Democrats vehemently against slavery), the new Free Soil Party nominated their own candidate, former

Democratic president Martin Van Buren. That presented a significant problem to the Whigs. If the Free Soilers could siphon off enough votes from the rest of the Whig party, they could recreate the disaster of the previous presidential election, when the Liberty Party candidate in 1844 took enough votes in New York State away from Whigs to throw the state, and the election, to the Democrats. That is how James K. Polk got into the White House and started the Mexican War. Lincoln's speech in Worcester thus had three goals: promote Taylor, discredit Cass, and limit abdication of Free Soilers. How successful he was remained to be seen.

If Lincoln thought the Free Soil Party of Worcester was the worst challenge he would encounter, he underestimated the radical antislavery sentiment that was waiting for him in New Bedford. Known mostly for its whaling industry, the city was also a hotbed of abolitionism. And Lincoln was no abolitionist.

Lincoln had paid little attention to slavery up to this point in his career. As a young Illinois state legislator in 1837 he had dissented against a bill that criminalized "anti-slavery agitation." But even though he explained that while "the institution of slavery is founded on both injustice and bad policy," he thought abolitionism increased rather than abated its evils. He thought that while Congress could abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, a federal territory, Congress did not have the authority to interfere with slavery in the states where it was already present. It was state action, not federal, that ended slavery in the North and it was up to individual states in the South to find their own path toward ending the peculiar institution.⁷ Even his spot resolution speech in Congress was more about anti-imperialism than slavery, although others believed Polk had started the war with Mexico to grab more land for slaveholders. During this tour of Massachusetts, he focused primarily on convincing Free Soilers that the Whig party was their best bet for blocking expansion of slavery into the newly gained western territories. Neither the Whigs nor the Free Soilers were actively working to abolish slavery where it existed.

But it would have been hard to miss the abolitionist sentiment in New Bedford and at his other Massachusetts stops. It was in New Bedford that Frederick Douglass first started a new life after his escape from slavery, and where he started reading *The Liberator*, the abolitionist newspaper edited by William Lloyd Garrison. Douglass later wrote that "My soul was set all on fire" by Garrison's passionate call for the immediate abolishment of slavery and investiture of full equality.⁸ Douglass first saw Garrison speak at New Bedford's Liberty Hall in 1841 and it was Garrison's people that asked Douglass for an impromptu recounting of his escape from slavery. That encounter led to his heroic speech days later at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society convention on Nantucket. The soft-spoken Garrison followed the imposing baritone voice of Douglass to the stage and a partnership was born. After encouraging Douglass to write the first version of his three autobiographies, Garrison arranged for a speaking tour to get Douglass's very personal account of living under the yoke of slavery out to white and Black audiences in New England. The two men eventually had a falling out – Douglass came to believe more direct action was necessary, in contrast to Garrison's moral fervor tempered by opposition to violence – but with Douglass's speaking and Garrison's adamant editorials in *The Liberator*, the two sparked a revolution in antislavery thought. Ironically, Garrison and Douglass each became

dedicated supporters of Lincoln late in the Civil War despite opposing his early stance on colonization.

Most antislavery advocates up to that time (including Abraham Lincoln) favored a gradual emancipation of enslaved people, often combined with some form of colonization. The northern states had all ended slavery, mostly by gradual means. Garrison was more vehement. His first editorial in *The Liberator* declared his intentions clearly:

*I am in earnest -- I will not equivocate -- I will not excuse -- I will not retreat a single inch -- AND I WILL BE HEARD.*⁹

Among those Garrison inspired were Gerrit Smith, Wendell Phillips, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Theodore Parker, all of whom would later vacillate between enemies and allies of Lincoln. There is no evidence Lincoln met any of these people during his 1848 trip (he did meet some later in the White House and William Herndon served as surrogate correspondent with Parker in the 1850s), but exposure to the stronger abolitionism of Massachusetts no doubt primed him for its growing fervency across the northern states in the following decade.

Lincoln was also learning that the North had to accept complicity in the growth of slavery. This was most noticeable when he traveled to Lowell, the center of the textile mill industry that epitomized another split in his party: Conscience Whigs versus Cotton Whigs.

He had already encountered the Conscience Whigs. Indeed, they were the main reason he was in Massachusetts. Henry Wilson, a former shoemaker who had grown into a leading state legislator had, along with Charles Francis Adams, Charles Allen, Anson Burlingame, and Charles Sumner, become disillusioned by what they felt was the lack of Whig commitment to fighting for the end of slavery in the western territories, leading to their founding of the Free Soilers. The other faction, the Cotton Whigs, agreed with the national Whig principles of an active federal government and Hamiltonian economic policies empowering individuals to better their condition, along with greater industrialization and government facilitation of education. Where they differed was the emphasis put on the question of slavery. Northern textile mills (and financiers and shipbuilders) relied on a robust cotton trade for their livelihoods and wealth. Therefore, they preferred to de-emphasize the slavery issue and often castigated extreme abolitionists like Garrison and Douglass. Cotton Whigs disdained abolitionist agitation. They needed the cotton, so they turned their eyes askance to its unfairness, immorality, and contradiction to America's founding credo in the Declaration of Independence that declared "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" and endowed with "unalienable Rights including Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."¹⁰ Prominent Cotton Whigs included Abbott and Amos Lawrence, Francis Cabot Lowell, Massachusetts Governor and polymath Edward Everett, Nathan Appleton, and perennial Whig leader Robert C. Winthrop.¹¹

That is not to say that Cotton Whigs in New England were pro-slavery. Mostly they acknowledged it was wrong, or at least wrong to have in the North, even as they tolerated it in the South. Cotton Whigs did not want slavery to expand westward, but they also told their southern trading partners they had no intention of ending slavery in the southern states where it existed. While the Conscience Whigs could be moralistic in their opposition to slavery, the Cotton Whigs refrained

from moral argument in favor of a more practical isolation of slavery to the South. Of course, the Whig Party was national at that point, with the Southern Whigs much more tolerant of slavery within their midst. That North/South variance would later portend civil war.

So, here we have Lincoln giving speeches in Massachusetts to promote the candidacy of Zachary Taylor. More importantly for his own future growth was that he was being exposed to the intraparty divisions that adversely affected the party's chances of winning the election. Spinoff parties like the Liberty Party had hurt those chances in 1844, and the Free Soilers were threatening the same in 1848. Lincoln was learning that the Whig party was not monolithic. While generally liberal in its economic views, it spanned a wider spectrum on slavery, an issue about to become much more central to the future of the nation. Lincoln was visiting cities economically dependent on textile mills relying on slave-labor grown cotton, which meant treading a softer line on the evils of slavery even as abolitionist fever was growing in the very cities so reliant on it. And then Lincoln meets William Henry Seward.

Lincoln's last speech in Massachusetts was in Boston, where he joined Seward on stage at Tremont Temple, across the street from where Lincoln was staying. The Boston *Atlas* listed the speakers as William Seward (the keynote), "Abram Lincoln" (despite inviting him and he being a sitting congressman, the newspapers still could not seem to spell his name right), textile industrialist Abbott Lawrence (a Cotton Whig), and Richard Fletcher (former congressman and first president of the American Statistical Association formed in Boston).

Seward was already an accomplished lawyer, a former state legislator, a former New York governor, and about to be elected U.S. Senator. He was an established Whig leader and a vocal opponent of slavery, which was why he was the headliner for the evening. The comparison of the unknown westerner with his odd southern-western drawl and unmanageable hair against Seward's erudite eastern formality must have been profoundly amusing to the largely learned Boston elite. Whereas Lincoln was forced to argue the inconsistency of Taylor's Whig credentials, Seward spoke in loftier terms of "providence" and not "bow[ing] before the aristocracy of the South," which a splinter vote for the Free Soil third party would assure.¹² Seward argued that "all Whigs agree – that Slavery shall not be extended into any territory now free – and they are doubtless willing to go one step further – that it shall be abolished where it now exists under the immediate protection of the General Government."¹³ He "believed in the force of moral power" and that "the time would come...when the free people would free the slaves in this country. This has to be accomplished by moral force.," adding the caveat that "it has to be done without injustice," by which he meant compensation to slaveholders.¹⁴ This was radical stuff for 1848 and would come back to haunt his chances for the presidency years later, but that night in the Tremont Temple climaxed with the admittedly partisan crowd giving three hearty cheers for "Old Zach," three more for Governor Seward, and three more for Mr. Lincoln, according to the *Atlas*.¹⁵

While the *Atlas* lauded Lincoln's speech as "powerful and convincing...which was cheered to the echo,"¹⁶ Seward seemed less impressed. Two decades later, after the Civil War and Lincoln's life had ended, the painter Francis Carpenter reported Seward's recollection of that night. In Seward's memory, Lincoln gave a "rambling, story-telling speech, putting the audience in good

humor, but avoiding any extended discussion of the slavery question.”¹⁷ Then there was the story that Lincoln told Seward the day after his 1848 remarks: “I have been thinking about what you said in your speech. I reckon you are right. We have got to deal with this slavery question and got to give much more attention to it hereafter than we have been doing.” Whether that story has any veracity is up for debate, but no doubt Lincoln was inspired by Seward’s command of the room and his unblinking belief that slavery was the moral cause of the nation. Lincoln was absorbing new insights for the future.¹⁸

Lessons Learned

Abraham Lincoln finished his tour of Massachusetts and made his way home to Springfield, Illinois. In a few months he would return to Washington to finish out his single term as a U.S. congressman, unaware that he would not hold political office again for the next twelve years. From one perspective, you could argue that Lincoln’s 1848 Massachusetts speeches were inconsequential. Zachary Taylor did carry Massachusetts and the election that fall, but the Free Soil candidate, Martin Van Buren, received ten percent of the national vote. Van Buren did even better in Massachusetts, totaling over 28 percent of the vote, more than the Democrat, Lewis Cass, meaning that the Free Soilers had siphoned off enough Whig votes to make the election much closer than it should have been. Not only did Lincoln fail to keep the Massachusetts Free Soilers in the Whig fold, but just two years later that splinter party went on to form a coalition with Democrats to oust the Whigs from the major state offices.

Evaluated from a different perspective, however, the 1848 trip proved to be critically important to Lincoln’s personal and political growth. He gained considerable insights into several factors that informed his later runs for the senate and the presidency.

First, he learned that the candidate matters. Zachary Taylor was nominated by the Whigs because the country cared more about having the Mexican War hero rather than for any strong partisan credentials. While Lincoln argued that Taylor’s apolitical background was a strength – he would defer to congressional Whigs as representatives of the people to guide his time in office – he knew that Taylor carried significant baggage that exacerbated the already delicate balance within the Whig Party itself. Whigs had argued the Mexican War was unconstitutional, a “Manifest Destiny” power grab not only to gain more land but to enable the spread of slavery. And yet here they were nominating a hero of that war, made worse because his plantations actively enslaved hundreds of Black Americans. Many in the Whig party felt these factors disqualified their own candidate.

Second, party divisions matter. The Whigs had always been a blended party, progressive in many ways but also a mix of national factions running the ideological span from liberal to conservative. This was evident in Massachusetts, where Cotton Whigs relying on slave-grown cotton to feed their profitable textile mills sometimes clashed with the growing number of Conscience Whigs who found any association with the slave-labor camps of the South objectionable. This ideological split, combined with the questionable choice of Taylor as the nominee, led to several of its most active leaders spurring the Whigs to form a third party. Lincoln had argued that a vote for Free Soilers was handing the election to the Democrats and

worked against the common antislavery expansion beliefs of the Whigs. He learned that unity around a single central goal is better than quibbling on differences around the edges.

Third, abolitionist fever was growing. As a young Illinois state legislator, Lincoln had opined on how slavery was founded on injustice, but also that abolitionist doctrines tended to harden proslavery defensiveness.¹⁹ But times had changed. Recognition of the immorality of slavery had grown to the point where abolitionism was becoming more mainstream in the North. New England abolitionists like Garrison, Parker, and Douglass, along with influential writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott, and Nathaniel Hawthorne helped shift public sentiment from more conservative antislavery (sometimes with colonization) to more radical abolitionism (sometimes with calls for full equality). Lincoln always understood that “public sentiment is everything,” and that a shift in the public’s attitude about slavery was not something to be ignored.

Fourth, while northern states had effectively abolished slavery, they were not free from complicity in the “peculiar institution.” Much of the wealth acquired by the North early in the nation’s history had come from some connection to slavery, be it shipbuilding, slave trading, or acceptance of financial contributions and students from the South to its finest colleges. As the northern economy shifted away from direct slavery, the growth of textile industry and the sale of materials and food crops to the South continued to bind together the two sections. That interdependence meant that eliminating slavery was now even more difficult than the task that overwhelmed the Framers of the Constitution.

Fifth, humor only goes so far. Lincoln was best known for his humorous stories, and all too often, his biting sarcasm. His speeches drew substantial crowds more for their entertainment value, the “hayseed in my hair” from the west who could rally the populace without being taken too seriously as a policymaker. While he mildly denounced slavery before, it would only be after this Massachusetts tour that he would start to see it as the driving force in national politics. Meeting William Seward in Boston, already a national leader, must have given him something to think about.

Lincoln’s tour of Massachusetts had given him new insights into the “slavery question” and the internal conflicts it created within the party and within the nation. And then he was out of office, although not entirely out of politics. It is true that he did not hold elective office from the time he left Congress in early 1849 until the time he was elected president in late 1860. In those intervening years he built a substantial law practice and continued riding the circuit courts in central Illinois. But he remained politically active, regularly giving speeches to support other candidates for office. His long-time foil in Illinois, Senator Stephen A. Douglas, had taken over the responsibility of pushing through the Compromise of 1850 with its formidable new Fugitive Slave Act. Four years later, Douglas advanced the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise and opened all the western territories to the potential of slavery, including the previously protected northern areas remaining from the Louisiana Purchase. Lincoln was aroused to reenter the political arena.

Over the next dozen years slavery would become the singular driver of conflict in the United States, pitting progressives against conservatives, anti-slavery against pro-slavery, union against disunion. This interregnum was one of the most acutely divisive and adversely significant extended decades in our national history. It would change the direction of our country, and it would change Lincoln into the man Americans routinely vote for as the greatest American president. In Part II, I will delve into that interregnum and Lincoln's return to New England in 1860, a trip that helped make him president.

¹ Basler, Roy P. 1953. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (hereafter, *CW*), Rutgers University Press, Lincoln to Archibald Williams, April 30, 1848, 1:468.

² *CW*, "Spot" Resolutions, December 22, 1847, 1:420-422.

³ Temple, Wayne C. 1986, *Lincoln's Connections with the Illinois Michigan Canal, His Return from Congress in '48, and His Invention* (hereafter, *Connections*) Illinois Bell, citing *Illinois Journal*, August 23, 1848, 1.

⁴ *CW*, Speech at Worcester, Massachusetts, September 12, 1848, 2:1.

⁵ *CW*, Speech in U.S. House of Representatives on the Presidential Question, July 27, 1848, 1:514.

⁶ Merry, Robert W. 2024. *Decade of Disunion: How Massachusetts and South Carolina Led the Way to Civil War, 1849-1861*, Simon & Schuster, 32.

⁷ *CW*, Protest in Illinois Legislature on Slavery, March 3, 1837, 1:74-75.

⁸ Douglass, Frederick, 1855, *Frederick Douglass: My Bondage and My Freedom*, 90; Stewart, Matthew, 2024, *An Emancipation of the Mind: Radical Philosophy, the War Over Slavery, and the Refounding of America*, W.W. Norton, 7.

⁹ See Massachusetts Historical Society Collections Online: <https://www.masshist.org/database/1698>.

¹⁰ See transcript, National Archives: <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

¹¹ Farrow, Anne, Lang, Joel, and Frank, Jenifer, 2005, *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited From Slavery*, Ballantine Books; Burlingame, Michael, 2008, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, Johns Hopkins University Press; Brauer, Kinley. 1967, *Cotton Versus Conscience: Massachusetts Whig Politics and Southwestern Expansion, 1843-1848*, Ross & Haines.

¹² *Boston Atlas*, September 23, 1848, 2; Hanna, William F. 1983, *Abraham Among the Yankees: Abraham Lincoln's 1848 Visit to Massachusetts*, The Old Colony Historical Society, Taunton, MA, 79.

¹³ Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 826 citing *Boston Journal*, n.d., copied in *New-York Tribune*, September 25, 1848.

¹⁴ Meacham, Jon, 2022, *And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle*, Random House, 106, citing *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, September 26, 1848.

¹⁵ *Boston Atlas*, September 23, 1848.

¹⁶ Hanna, *Abraham Among the Yankees*, 80; *Boston Atlas*, September 23, 1848.

¹⁷ Peraino, Kevin, 2013, *Lincoln in the World: The Making of a Statesman and the Dawn of American Power*, Crown Publishers, 78, citing Seward's autobiography edited by his son.

¹⁸ Hanna, *Abraham Among the Yankees*, 75; *Boston Post*, June 10, 1848, 2; Schouler, James, 1909, *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, "Abraham Lincoln at Tremont Temple in 1848," 76 (James Schouler is *Atlas* editor William Schouler's son).

¹⁹ Kent, David J. 2020, "Abraham Lincoln's Long Road to Emancipation." *The Lincolnian*, Volume XXXVII(2): 7-10.