

Chapter 240 – The Hold-Out Whigs Hold Their Nominating Convention



Dates:
September 17-18, 1856

Sections:
• The “Hold-Out Whigs” Back Millard Fillmore For President

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Three months have passed since the Republican convention when the “Hold-Out Whig” delegates come to Baltimore on September 17-18, 1856 to select their presidential nominee. They are some 150 strong, and represent twenty-six of the nation’s thirty-one states, across the North and South.

The group includes many prominent national politicians who seek a stable, peaceful government capable of preserving the Union. On March 10 they have formally rejected an offer to merge into the Republican Party.

The delegates share a fear that the growing North-South divide over slavery will end with a break-up of the Union and possibly even a civil war. They also believe that the Republican’s open hostility toward the South as a whole (not just the 350,000 slave-holders) will exacerbate this threat.

Millard Fillmore (1800-1874)

Most of the “hold-outs” come from the conservative wing of the old Whig Party, and they often express Know Nothing Party concerns over the dangers of Catholic immigrants who may owe their primary allegiance to a foreign power.

Many are also Fillmore men, among them his Secretary of State, Edward Everett of Massachusetts, his Attorney General, John J. Crittenden of Kentucky, John Bell of Tennessee, who attends the event, and Sam Houston of Texas -- the latter two being the only two Southern senators voting against the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act.

The Party platform they settle on is one page long and consists of eight resolutions, focused on their concerns over preserving the Union.

Resolved, That the Whigs of the United States are assembled here by reverence for the Constitution, and unalterable attachment to the National Union, and a fixed determination to do all in their power to preserve it for themselves and posterity

Resolved, That we regard with the deepest anxiety the present disordered condition of our national affairs. A portion of the country being ravaged by civil war and large sections of our population embittered by mutual recriminations, and we distinctly trace these calamities to the culpable neglect of duty by the present National Administration.

Resolved, That the Whigs of the United States have declared as a fundamental article of their political faith, the absolute necessity for avoiding geographical parties; that the danger so clearly discerned by the "Father of his Country," founded on geographical distinction, has now become fearfully apparent in the agitation convulsing the nation, which must be arrested at once if we would preserve our Constitutional Union from dismemberment,

Resolved, That the only remedy for an evil so appalling is to support the candidate pledged to neither geographical section nor arrayed in political antagonism, but holding both in just and equal regard; that we congratulate the friends of the Union that such a candidate exists in Millard Fillmore.

Resolved: That...we look to him... for his devotion to the Constitution in its true spirit, and his inflexibility in executing the laws; but, beyond all these attributes, of being representative of neither of the two sectional parties now struggling for political supremacy.

Resolved, That in the present exigency of political affairs, we...proclaim a conviction that the restoration of the Fillmore Presidency will furnish the best if not the only means of restoring peace.

With the platform approved, it takes one ballot for the delegates to select ex-President Millard Fillmore to head their ticket, with Andrew Jackson Donelson in the second slot. Together they hope to present the nation with a middle way, a New Yorker and a Tennessee man, a Northerner and a Southern slave-holder, a synthesis of Whig, Democrat and Know Nothing.

Time will tell that the core sentiments expressed at this convention will live on right up to the opening salvos of war at Ft. Sumter in April 1861. They are the pleas of men who consider themselves patriots, sons of the founders, defenders of the Constitution, and heirs of Andrew Jackson's devotion to one nation indivisible:

The Federal Union, It must be preserved.

It is Sam Houston who best captures the essence of what these "Whig Holdouts" stands for vis a vis the other party options:

The Whig party lives only in the memory of its great name...The Democracy has dwindled down to mere sectionalism...It has lost the principles of cohesion and boasts no longer a uniform policy...It too has shown a disposition to court an alien influence to sustain it, while it has declared and practiced relentless proscription against Native Born Americans citizens.

Of the Republicans I can only say that their platform and principles are sectional and I cannot conceive how any man loving this Union ...can support a ticket fraught with such disastrous consequences to the whole country.

A sense of duty... leads me to support... Fillmore and Donelson. They are good men, and I think the only men...who do most assuredly...claim the cordial support of...true hearted Americans, Democrats and Whigs. All faithful naturalized citizens, though of foreign birth, who cannot be controlled by any foreign influence, can come forward to their support as national men, capable and willing to support the Constitution and the Union.

Thus Fillmore and Donelson run as native born “national men,” intent on rising above sectionalism and maintaining the Union.