

POLE RAISING: A CAMPAIGN ACTIVITY

Introduction by George A. Turner

Often a special feature of political party rallies during presidential campaigns in the mid-1800s involved raising a large pole for a candidate. Democrats used a hickory tree in honor of Andrew Jackson, known as "Old Hickory," and the father of the party. The Whigs favored a poplar tree for their pole raising events. When the Republicans came into existence, they adopted the poplar since many of its members were former Whigs.

Selecting the right pole was an important decision. It needed to be proportioned and of great height. It took several people to cut and trim the tree, haul it to the meeting, and put it upright in a hole. *Columbia Democrat* and *The Star of the North*, two Democrat newspapers in Bloomsburg, each published an article in late summer 1860 about two Democratic political meetings in Sugarloaf Township and Bloomsburg that raised "hickory poles." It was election time with a large majority of Pennsylvania Democrats supporting Vice President John C. Breckinridge, a Kentucky slave owner for President, Senator Joseph Lane of Oregon for Vice President, and Henry Foster for Governor.

Pole Raising in Bloomsburg

The Star of the North, August 22, 1860

The friends of Breckinridge, Lane and Foster, erected on last Saturday afternoon, between the house of five and six o'clock in East Bloomsburg, near the residence of Mr. Henry Wanich, a magnificent hickory pole, not much short of one hundred feet in length, with a streamer on the tope, and a splendid flag bearing the names of Breckinridge, Lane and Foster, our gallant Democratic nominees. Quite a large and respectable number of Democrats participated in this raising, considering the little notice that was given. It was not published by large flaming hand bills or otherwise, that such a demonstration was to be made but still the gathering would not have fallen much short in numbers of that of the Republican Mass Meeting held in this place not long since. We understand that this demonstration was gotten up by the workingmen of Bloom Furnace and that vicinity. Everything was well arranged, and the pole raised quite handily, notwithstanding it being an uncommon heavy one for its length.

After the pole was planted, three round cheers were given for the candidates whose names were inscribed on the flag, when Co. L. L. Tate¹ was called upon, who made some very appropriate remarks on the political questions of the day. He was afterwards followed by John G. Freeze, Esq.,² who chanced to come by on his return from a political

canvassing tour. He rose in the buggy and dealt out to the Republican party some pretty hard hits, not forgetting to pay Mr. Curtin³ and supporters a few left-handed compliments in relation to the tariff, and thereby fully establishing the fact that Mr. Foster is, and always has been a tariff man – an advocate of the judicious tariff – and Mr. Curtin only a trafficking pretender, a man who has been pitch-forked into public notoriety, like many others of that class of men, by the Know-Nothing organization⁴ of 1854. The speaker was frequently interrupted by out-bursts of applause.

We had almost forgotten to mention that there was a sufficient number of Democratic ladies present to set to flight half the Republican worshippers in this place.

Pole Raising in Sugarloaf Township

Columbia Democrat, September 22, 1860.

Pursuant to public notice, the Democrats of Sugarloaf, Benton, and other parts of Columbia, Sullivan and Luzerne counties, convened on Saturday last, - the 15th of September – at the public house of Mr. Ezekiel Cole, in Sugarloaf township, Columbia county, and raised a beautiful Hickory Pole, eighty-five feet long, without a splice, after which the meeting organized by the appointment of the following officers, viz:

President – JOHN McHENRY, Sr.,

(A veteran Democrat of near eighty years.)

VICE PRESIDENTS

William Cole – Joseph Hess

John Kile – Andrew Laubach

J. D. Harrison – John J. Stiles

David Lewis – Wm. B. Peterman

SECRETARIES

Edward B. Snider & Thomas Seigfried

This is the first Democratic Mass Meeting held in Columbia county this season, and it was a grand outpouring of the every-faithful Democrats of that section of country, and gave unmistakable evidence of their unwavering adhesion to the great principles of the National Democracy⁵. It was a telling demonstration in favor of the election of Breckinridge, Lane and Foster. In short, it was one of the old-fashioned Jackson Democratic Meetings.

Before 10 o'clock, A.M., the people began to assemble, some on foot, others in four and six horse wagons, with appropriate political emblems and flags waving. At about 11 o'clock the Hickory Tree arrived at the Fisherman's Hotel, drawn by seven yoke of Democratic Oxen, escorted by an army of live Democrats, and its arrival was greeted by nine rounds of hearty cheers. An excellent dinner was prepared by Mr. Cole, of which hundreds partook to general satisfaction.

[The newspaper gave brief accounts of the speeches given by Edward B. Snider, of Phelpsville, Sullivan County and Alem B. Tate, editor of the *Berwick Gazette*.]

Mr. McHenry, the venerable and honorable President of the Meeting, then addressed the audience, in "thoughts that breathed and words that burned," making – without disparagement to any of the other speakers – the strongest speech of the Day. He gave, in brief, the history of the two parties during the past eighty ears, attesting the fidelity and consistency of the democracy, and with patriotic zeal, admonished his young friends to beware of the treason of the wily opposition. Mr. McHenry then announced the meeting adjourned, which was done with peals of cheers for "Mr. John McHenry and Democracy."



Note: In the 1860 presidential election results for Columbia County, John C. Breckinridge, representing the southern wing of the Democratic Party, won a clear majority of the votes, 55%. Abraham Lincoln, the Republican candidate, came in second with 42%. Stephen Douglas, the northern Democratic candidate received only 2%, and John Bell, the Constitution-Union Party got 1%.

¹ Levi L. Tate was the editor of the *Columbia Democrat*.

² Freeze, a Bloomsburg attorney, actively involved in the Columbia Democratic Party.

³ Andrew G. Curtin was the Republican candidate for Governor of Pennsylvania, and he was elected to the office twice, 1860 and 1863.

⁴ This was a minor political party in the 1850s that favored strict immigration laws.

⁵ Democracy was another name for the Democratic Party.