

Antebellum Politics, Diseases and Divas

Because every action causes a reaction, it is often difficult to find a starting place for events in history, for each event telescopes out of the previous. However, for the sake of our story we will begin with 1848. The Mexican War had ended with the United States expanding its territory, making way for new states. The question was: would they be admitted into the Union as a slave or slave free state. A second event that year proved to acerbate the problem. In April seventy-six slaves in Washington attempted an escape from their bondage, thus pushing Congress to outlaw slave trafficking in the District, but not slavery.

Free states like Indiana hailed the law as only the beginning and encouraged Congress to abolish slavery throughout the nation. The *Indiana Valparaiso Observer* rejoiced, "Hail Columbia! A good beginning is made towards ridding the General Government of that institution. We did not think this Congress capable of so glorious an act. Let them try again. The next step should be to prohibit slaveholding... Freedom throughout the jurisdiction of Congress...is the only way the question can be settled.

Toward the end of President Zachary Taylor's administration (1849-1850) the South had become increasingly alarmed over western states being admitted into the Union as free states. The South's concern was two-fold: first that it was being denied the opportunity to expand slavery and second, it would upset the balance of congress through more representation from free-states. In November a number of States Rights men met in Mecklenburg County to protest a bill permitting California into the Union, declaring it to be "impolitic, unjust...and violation of the Constitution." They further stated the move was jeopardizing "the harmony and tending to rupture of the Union." Their several resolutions threatened secession that was; the general feeling of the South.

One Carolinian accused Massachusetts's manufacturers of hypocrisy who denounced slavery while buying southern cotton produced by slave labor. Addressing men of the South the writer declared, "These people...think it is doing God service to rob you of your property [and]...would be tomorrow beggars--but for your money, which you pour into their pockets for Massachusetts goods and manufactures--they denounce and curse you because your money is produced by slave labor."

South Carolinians, ever ready to speak of their supposed right to secede, began to agitate itself. Part of the population shouted for immediate secession while others,

Submissionists, were convinced they should not leave the Union without its sisters. President Taylor, a decorated veteran of the War with Mexico and father-in-law to Jefferson Davis, who would in ten years become president of the southern confederacy, was opposed to what would become known as the Compromise of 1850 and threatened to hang any secessionists as high as he hung traitors in Mexico.

Vice President Millard Fillmore came to the White House in 1850 following death of acute gastroenteritis. Unlike his predecessor, he was in favor of a compromise that would appease the South and preserve the Union. On 18 September 1850 the President signed the Fugitive Slave Act into law, enforcing everyone living in free states to assist in returning runaway slaves to their owners. Fillmore and most of congress hoped the Act would deter slaves from escaping and insurrection as well as providing protection of property rights of slaveholders. The President made the law particularly odious by threats to use the Army and Navy to ensure compliance.

Many Southerners believed the passage of this bill was a victory for the South, that it placed the institution of slavery on a more solid footing than ever before. Others however, forecast this this was only a shadow of concession. The *Charleston Mercury* warned, "The law will be repealed--the emancipation of slavery in the District of Columbia will be completed--the migration of slaves from one State to another will be prohibited. Slavery will be prohibited from forts and arsenals, and all other territory of the Untied States, and but a little while will have elapsed before a majority of the States, sufficient to amend the Constitution will formally and constitutionally abolish slavery throughout the States of America."

Fearing the cancer of free states would continue to spread, strong opposition came from several southern states: South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. The North also had it opposers: Massachusetts,

To his day it is believed that Fillmore's conciliatory politics and the series of laws passed under the Compromise of 1850 balanced the power between slaveholding and free states and deterred the Civil War for ten years. Gradually, however, southern resentment grew.

In the spring of 1851 Great Britain had it quarrels with South Carolina concerning a state law that forbid anyone from trading with a slave. The British contended that the law violated the Treaty of 1815 by denying black slave seaman entrance into its ports, thus violating a treaty clause that provided for protection and security commerce. Oddly enough, the state had passed the law in 1822 and three had

been no point of contention raised for twenty-eight years. The crux of the matter centered on British abolitionists having been agitated by northern American abolitionists. Gradually the quarrel dissipated from the political scene.

As explosive as American politics was at the beginning of the 1850s, a bright light appeared on the landscape in the form of Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale. She was completely unknown in the United States until introduced by J. P. (a sucker born every minute) Barnum. While touring England in 1849 with his General Tom Thumb show and a black woman he claimed was 164 years old and had nursed George Washington, Barnum met Lind in Germany. In January 1850 he convinced the thirty-nine year old soprano to sign a contract for 150 concerts. This business deal would eventually earn her \$250,000 and him \$500,000.

Throughout the spring and summer Barnum promoted his newest star with a publicity campaign so successful east coast Americans were eagerly anticipating her arrival. Jenny Lind and her entourage including Barnum arrived in New York City on 1 September aboard the Steamship *Atlantic*. 30,000 to 40,000 people greeted her. These crowds became commonplace on her American tour and were widely known as the “Jenny Lind crush.” An amusing sidebar to the *Atlantic* occurred in March of the following year when it was feared the ship--twenty-three days out of Liverpool--went down with all passengers. Spiritualism had taken hold in the urban areas during this time and when one passenger disembarked he found that his wife had been committed to an asylum, driven mad by “rappings” of the drowned victims.

The beautiful operatic soprano performed her first two concerts in New York days after her arrival and eventually performed before President Fillmore, Daniel Webster and other notables. Jenny took the nation by storm and her name was applied to streets, food, locomotives, furniture, music, cigars, schools, bridges, eyeglasses, towns and even an island. Jacob Moore of Western York County was so taken with her that he named his riding horse for the Swedish beauty.

Following a successful tour of the east coast Jenny Lind arrived in Havana in January 1851, induced by Barnum with promises of stately accommodations and adoring fans. Contrary to her expectations, the “Swedish Nightingale” stepped onto an empty wharf and without fanfare a carriage delivered her and her companions to the Hotel de Colon. There, on the staircase landing leading to the grand salon, Jenny publicly voiced her indignation over the apartments she considered unsuitable for a woman of her talent. One newspaper reported “the sweet angelic Jenny, actually flew into a vulgar passion, expressing herself in

French with the greatest vehemence. Barnum managed to calm down his star and spoke to the proprietor they had to have more rooms as well as the grand salon. For this the proprietor wanted \$100 above the previously arrangement of \$300. Barnum was outraged and after staying two days he gave notice of vacating because Miss Lind could not sleep for the racket. The entourage moved to a private house nearer the theater where he paid rent plus \$200 a month for the use of the furniture--Barnum was proving his own theory that "a sucker is born every minute."

Cost was only part of his problems. The people of Havana were not taken with the little Swede and actually scoffed her diva-like appearances. For while she ran about heavily veiled in a very theatrical manner as though she did not want to be recognized when no one had the slightest curiosity. Tired of being ignored she was seen walking her cousin in the plaza without a veil among many men who acted as though the great Jenny Lind was not there.

She was scheduled to sing ten nights; Barnum knew that if she did not win over the Cubans the first night her reputation would be tarnished and his costly investment would be lost. Cuban Habaneras were incensed by the high cost of tickets to the concerts. The price of a ticket \$4--half going to gain entrance and half if you wanted a seat.

The night of her premiere nearly 3,000 were in attendance. When she appeared on stage three to four hundred applauded out of some respect, followed by hisses from the remainder. Never having received such a cold reception she stood like a statue before she could regain her composure. Once her emotions were settled she began singing to a cold, silent crowd. During the entire concert she received some applauded but the Castilians tighten their lips and sat like stone. The little nightingale doggedly continued to fill the theater to the rafters with her song in spite of her audience's indifference. It was not until the final act that the house erupted with applause; demanding no less than five encores. Having conquered the island she returned to New Orleans and continued her American tour.

Healthcare, though not touted by the politicians of the antebellum period, was on the minds of the people of the United States, as well as it should have been. Of the twelve-month period between 1850 and 1851 nearly 50,000 died of Cholera and another 150,000 of Consumption.

"Fresh and pure" medicines were being hawked through newspaper advertisements while others, like Dr. Christie warned the public of drugs and medicines that

increases diseases, directing the potential customer to his Galvanic Belt and Magnetic Fluid. The belt and fluid was reported, by Dr. Christie himself, to have “entirely and permanently cured” 60,000 women of all classes of nervous complaints. This wonder device could cure everything from apoplexy to lumbago, palpitations, fits, cramps, paralysis and palsy. John Eman of upstate New York was reduced to a skeleton by dyspepsia, but he got a belt and fluid and was soon as healthy as anyone in the town. Mr. Wood was so drawn by cramp and rheumatism he could not move, but one week of wearing the belt he was up and about attending to business.

Other parts of the world were having their problems as well. In 1850 the Danish navy blockaded the German port of Kiel. Desperate to sink the blockade the government was willing to try anything, even an idea of a Prussian corporal who persuaded a shipbuilder to construct a blockade-breaking submarine. The South, more than a decade later would introduce the world to the Hunley in an attempt to break the blockade of the Charleston harbor.

Meanwhile Australia was having labor shortages and had finally convinced Parliament to send convicts to work off their sentences. Also in the Pacific, believing he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ, Hong Xiuquan led a rebellion of peasants against the Qing Dynasty. The Taiping revolt lasted more than 10 years at the cost of the lives of 20 million Chinese.

During this time--from 1850 to 1860--the United States enjoyed relative peace and an exuberant prosperity. The North and West were undergoing radical changes in society while the South retained status quo through cotton production. The antebellum period was much like the 1960s and 1970s when the population grew tired of traditional Christianity and began looking for something that appeared more relevant. Men like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman began tinkering with eastern religions and transcendentalism. Joseph Smith’s new religion was thriving amid hardships and would become one of the more successful movements from the 1800s.

Many of the Temperance Movement of the 1840s began to take a look at the diet of Christians. In May 1850 the American Vegetarian Society was founded. Rev. William Metcalfe pastor of the forty-member Bible Christian Church--all abstainers of meat--with Presbyterian minister Sylvester Graham, another vegan. Graham had compared humans with orangutans and concluded a vegetarian diet was natural for both. Graham would become famous for his Graham crackers. Soon another vegan and Seven Day Adventist, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg invented

the corn flake at his Battle Creek, Michigan sanatorium. A patient of Dr. Kellogg's--C. W. Post--converted to vegetarianism and gave the world Grape Nuts. One of the many good effects of this cereal was it acted as an anaphrodisiac--a good thing according to Post.

Similar to our present political scene, America in the 1850s was taking a hard look at immigration. In 1850 the anti immigration American Party was founded when middle class Protestants felt threatened by the infloods of Irish and German unskilled workers. These immigrants were stereotyped as ignorant and inferior and were discriminated against because of their Catholicism. While some Americans wanted to shut the gates to immigrants others wanted to deport others. Also in 1850, the American Colonization Society was formed to promote emigration of African Americans. Virginia also set aside \$30,000 a year for five years to aid emigration.

Southerners, now securely confined in a prison of their own making--slavery--the North focused all its energy on developing into an industrialized nation that would have to be reckoned with. At the close of the decade the proverbial straw came when Abraham Lincoln entered the White House on a minority vote. Though South Carolina had been divided on the subject of secession in 1850, firebrands set the state ablaze. So enflamed, South Carolina was in no mood to tarry at decision's doorway; she would leave the Union *with or without* her southern sisters. You know the rest of the story.