

**Minnesota Historical Society
Collections Up Close
Republic National Convention 1892**

Local historians may be experiencing a sense of déjà vu lately.

The preparations, the promoting, the promises, the protection, and the potential profiteers of the 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul seem like echoes of the Republican convention that Minneapolis hosted in 1892.

Then as now, newspapers crowed about the wonderful opportunity the city is being given to show off. After all, 5,000 reporters, “the pencil train”, would descend on the city in 1892. City fathers beamed at the prospect of showing off the Mill city.

Streets were spruced up, bunting hung, and yet another X, the six-year-old Exposition Building was altered to accommodate the 902 delegates and 10,000 spectators. Then as now the more important state delegations were awarded the best accommodation, which in this case was the West Hotel [which still only had 1 bath for every 3 rooms] on Hennepin. Much of the difficult work of accommodating the various delegations fell to the local convention chair George A. Brackett, who was the president of the Minneapolis stockyards and packing company. It may be unrelated but Brackett eventually lit out for the Klondike gold fields. Much of the political debate and show of support took place in the streets outside of the convention halls.

The “President-Makers” – as the press referred to the delegates- had come to nominate the incumbent, Benjamin Harrison, grandson of President William Henry Harrison. But “Little Ben” was no Old Tippecanoe. Harrison’s leadership resulted in some important reform legislation such as the Sherman Antitrust Act and the McKinley Tariff Act but he was cool, independent and a lackluster leader and mid the term congressional elections were a disaster for the Republicans.

So, this is where the intrigue comes in. There was a movement to dump the incumbent, nominating instead Secretary of State, James Blaine, the “Plumed Knight”. Blaine had stolen the nomination before from sitting President Chester A. Arthur only to lose the general election. To make a long story short, Blaine’s supporters could not muster enough votes to keep Harrison from a first ballot victory. “The plume succumbs to grandpa’s hat,” a headline read. Harrison lost the general election to Grover Cleveland who avenged his defeat in 1888 by Harrison.

By the way, neither candidate bothered to come to Minneapolis but non-delegate celebs such as Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass showed up to push their causes.

Eric Nathanson tells another important story in the latest issue of Minnesota History magazine. The convention of 1892 was the last time for generations to come that there was a significant block of African American delegates – 116 or about 13% of the convention. Their concern and outrage was that blacks were being lynched with impunity at an unprecedented rate.

In the end the city leaders were quite proud of the job they did hosting the convention but there was grumbling among the delegates and bad press nationally. The heat and the crowded spaces had taxed some visitors to the point where a departing Boston reporter declared that Minneapolis was “never intended as a convention city” and predicted that it would a long time before it was selected again.

Now 116 years later Minneapolis will get a chance to redeem itself by playing second fiddle – a supporting role- to St. Paul at this year’s Republican National Convention.