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Ohio's Civil War Governors

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with an introduction by william b. hesseltine

OHIO CIVIL WAR CENTENNIAL COMMISSION

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GOVERNORS

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OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS
FOR
THE OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**Publications of the
Ohio Civil War Centennial Commission
No. 11**

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INTRODUCTION

THE GOVERNORSHIP of an American state during the Civil War was a difficult and frustrating position filled with responsibilities, and furnishing few rewards either personally or politically. The necessities of armed combat, the raising and care of troops, the mustering of men and money produced, almost inevitably, confusion and adverse reactions. Few were the governors of American states who survived the war with reputations unimpaired. During the years of the great American conflict, there were sixty-three men who held office as governors of the Northern states. Only a handful were acclaimed later for having been "great War Governors." Oliver P. Morton in Indiana, John A. Andrew in Massachusetts, and Andrew G. Curtin in Pennsylvania receive such a popular accolade, but the great majority—James T. Lewis in Wisconsin, Stephen A. Miller in Minnesota, Samuel J. Kirkwood and William M. Stone in Iowa, for example—were lost from popular memory. Few governors were re-elected—and few were even renominated by their parties. The duties and obligations of the governorship—even when they were faithfully executed—brought little satisfaction to the public and less to the unfortunate men who managed the affairs of the states in time of turmoil.

In a larger sense, the Civil War brought a subtle but substantial change in federal-state relations. The federal union, which Abraham Lincoln swore to uphold and for whose defense he first called upon the states for troops, was made up of "sovereign" states jealous of

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their distinctive powers and rights. Under the exigencies of war—a war waged for a national purpose—the rights of the states became subordinate to the powers of the nation, and a “New Nation” emerged from the Civil War. In many instances the growing power of the national government and the weakening role of the states brought conflict between state and federal officers. Ohio’s Civil War history, however, was marked by no serious clashes between her governors and the national administration. Instead, there was a remarkable harmony, and the constitutional transition was made easier because Ohio’s governors could act as a mediating influence. With one accord, they co-operated with Lincoln and the Washington authorities. They were neither radicals trying to push the government to extreme positions, nor obstructionists attempting to preserve an old and untenable independence.

Three in number were the governors of Ohio, and none of them won or warranted the title of “great.” They were, each in his own way, efficient and competent. Each was diligent, patriotic, devoted, and hardworking. Yet, none of them was popular, none was re-elected or renominated. Their very competence and diligence, of tremendous importance to the nation in its hour of extremity, cost them the reward of public acclaim. Yet, of the sixty-three governors of Northern states, William Dennison, David Tod, and John Brough were among the more able, the more diligent, and the more dependable.

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Ohio's War Governors

RICHARD H. ABBOTT

WILLIAM DENNISON

THE BEGINNING of the Civil War found William Dennison occupying the governor's office in the capitol in Columbus. He had been elected in 1859; and although there were rumors of war and mounting sectional tensions, no one had really believed that war was imminent; and no one thought of selecting candidates for governor on the basis of their ability to manage state affairs in time of war. Instead, William Dennison owed his nomination by the Republican party to his eminent availability and the absence of any conspicuous rivals for the honor.

The two administrations of Salmon P. Chase, Ohio's first Republican governor, had served to establish the new Republican party in Ohio. It was a party made up of diverse elements: old Whigs who were committed to the ancient "American System" of Henry Clay, ardent abolitionists from the Western Reserve, rising industrialists from the burgeoning communities close to iron and coal deposits, and railroad promoters who envisioned systems of iron rails which could connect Ohio's rivers and lakes and carry its products even across the Alleghenies. There was a tinge of temperance in the party and more than a trace of soreheads who had been rejected by the more conservative elements which dominated the Democratic party. By 1857, too, there were Know-Nothings, who hated foreigners and feared the Roman Church, coming to rest in Republican ranks. In 1855, Salmon P. Chase—who had been a Democrat and a Liberty party man, then a Free Soiler, and even a Democrat again, but who had always been an outspoken enemy of slavery—won the governorship on the Republican ticket. Re-elected in 1857, Chase devoted his time to organizing the Republicans, ironing out the disagreements

in their ranks, and marshalling them into an effective political unit. There were, true enough, great personal rivalries among the leading Republicans, but the party was, essentially, the representative of reform and of progress. It appealed to business men and industrial laborers—new elements in Ohio society—rather than to the older agricultural and commercial interests.¹

By 1859, the Republicans had achieved political experience and sufficient cohesion to enable Chase to go to the United States Senate. His departure made way for William Dennison, a man who had been a Whig in politics and one of the original organizers, along with Chase, of the Republican party. He was a native of Cincinnati, a graduate of Miami University where he had excelled in history and belles lettres, and a lawyer who had practiced with conspicuous success. He had been a banker, and was director and president of a railroad. He had served in the state senate where he had stood firmly against the state's Black Laws and had spoken against the Buchanan administration's efforts to extend slavery into the territories. He had opposed the annexation of Texas, the war with Mexico, and the Compromise of 1850. His interests were broad. He organized a county agricultural society, served on the Columbus city council, and helped establish an iron rolling mill in the capital. Though he was not as prominent as Chase, his antislavery record was clear, and he shared with his predecessor an impressive demeanor—even an air of pomposity—and very considerable ability. His nomination by the Republicans came, however, almost by default and not from any appreciation of his qualities. Most of Ohio's prominent Republicans were in Congress and Dennison was simply available. He won the nomination without significant opposition.²

In 1859, Ohioans faced several economic problems that could have played a role in the gubernatorial campaign, but both political parties preferred instead to concentrate on national issues. Rather than attempting to reconcile conflicting opinions within their parties on such questions as the disposal of the state canal system, an independent treasury, and taxation of state banks, both Republicans and Democrats discussed the Fugitive Slave law and the federal courts. Democrats also raised the issue of free Negroes in Ohio, asserting that anyone with a "visible admixture" of African blood should not be allowed to vote. They condemned Republican-sponsored personal liberty laws that hindered enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act and demanded that state officers fulfill their constitutional obligations by remanding escaped slaves captured within Ohio's borders. Republicans, dropping their earlier emphasis on restricting slavery expansion, crusaded against

the Fugitive Slave law and demanded reforms in the federal court system that would give better representation to the various sections of the country. Radical Republicans also prevented the renomination of Chief Justice Joseph R. Swan to the State Supreme Court, because he had, in May, upheld the constitutionality of the disputed fugitive law. Although Joshua Giddings, abolitionist Congressman from the Western Reserve, exulted at his party's radical course, Abraham Lincoln, who would be Republican presidential nominee in 1860, disapproved of the Ohio party's actions. He felt that such a struggle against the Constitution would greatly endanger the Republican cause in the nation.³

The Democrats selected Rufus P. Ranney, an able lawyer and former Supreme Court judge, to oppose Dennison and brought Stephen A. Douglas, the country's leading Democrat, into the state to speak for him; Republicans countered by importing Lincoln to stump for Dennison. Although the Republican gubernatorial candidate surprised fellow politicians with his success in debating Ranney during a stump tour across the state, Dennison later would prove more suited to issuing platitudes against slavery extension and Supreme Court decisions than to rallying a state under the stress of war. Dennison won this political test and defeated his rival by 13,236 votes, about the average majority for Republican gubernatorial candidates. The Republican party also carried the rest of the state offices and won back control of both houses of the state assembly. This legislature, with Republicans outnumbering Democrats 25 to 10 in the Senate and 58 to 46 in the House, would be in session at the opening of the Civil War.⁴

Unfortunately for Dennison, the majority of Ohioans gave him their votes but not their hearts. The suave, well-mannered gentleman seemed to most citizens to be a vain and haughty aristocrat. Among railroad men and bank officers, Dennison had a reputation for financial ability and a capacity for controlling large operations; but he never was able to reach outside his small circle of friends to gather the popular support he needed as governor. To the end of his life, only a few men knew Dennison well; most found him impersonal and austere. In the months ahead, when the governor sought to mobilize Ohio for war, he lacked the full support of the state; Ohioans proved to be quick with criticism and slow with praise.⁵

During the campaign debates, Dennison had spoken well; but after the returns were in, his speeches became prolix and stilted. His inaugural address, delivered January 9, 1860, was long and verbose. The new governor surveyed many subjects: he launched an attack on slavery, claimed the western territories for freedom, condemned secessionist plots, and prophesied that the West would soon be in control

of the federal government. Though he promised Ohio would support the Constitution with all its compromises and would protect the rights and property of citizens of other states, he denied the Union was an instrument to propagate human slavery, and he criticized Supreme Court decisions which asserted the right of property in men. Dennison ended his address with a plea for colonization of free Negroes. Despite the wide sweep of Dennison's message, one of his unfortunate phrases attracted most of the publicity; he solemnly stated that if the South seceded, a standing army "would be the succedaneum for the security conferred by a common government." Henceforth he was known, even to important Republican newspapers, as the "succedaneum Governor."⁶

In one of his first official actions as governor, Dennison had an opportunity to appear as the conciliator of sections when, late in January, the legislatures of Kentucky and Tennessee visited Ohio. The recently completed Louisville and Nashville railroad had just joined the capitals of the two states; and, when their respective legislatures met in Louisville to celebrate the event, Dennison invited them to cross the Ohio and come to Columbus. Dennison there capped a series of speeches proclaiming the common interests of the three states by promising that Ohio would recognize the right of people in every state to establish and maintain undisturbed their domestic institutions. The sovereignty of the states had to be maintained, he declared, in all matters not clearly designated to the federal government.⁷

Despite such attempts to achieve harmony through oratory, actions proved more indicative of the future relations between the border states. The Kentucky legislature had no more returned home than it drew up and passed a law to reorganize and strengthen the state militia. In March, Dennison refused to consider the request of Beriah Magoffin, Kentucky's governor, to return two men charged with helping to free a slave. A few days earlier, Dennison had denied a similar appeal from another neighboring governor, John Letcher of Virginia, who asked that Ohio return two members of John Brown's raiding party. In both cases Dennison based his refusal to extradite on the grounds that the offenses for which the fugitives were to answer did not rank among those listed in the Constitution. Ohio Democrats quickly made an issue of Dennison's failure to ease the distrust of neighboring slave states and later sought to embarrass him by trying to pass a bill compelling the governor to deliver fugitives on request—this attempt failed. Despite harassment from Democratic and conservative quarters, Dennison had quickly and clearly indicated

he would not go beyond oratory in any attempt to conciliate the southern states.⁸

Shortly after Dennison took office, the preliminaries of the 1860 presidential campaign began to reveal internal dissensions in both the Republican and Democratic parties. Among Ohio's Republicans, there were supporters of New York Senator William H. Seward, the newly elected Senator Chase, and Senator Ben Wade from the Western Reserve. At one time or another, the governor seemed to favor each of the aspirants. In April, he visited Washington, attended a dinner at Seward's, entered the floor of the Senate as Chase's guest, and laughed affably with Seward. By the time the Republican National Convention met in Chicago's Wigwam, Governor Dennison was on hand to tell reporters he preferred Seward if one of Ohio's senators could not be nominated; but cynical observers concluded that he favored Wade primarily because he hoped to be elevated to the Senate should Wade be translated to the White House. Ohio's delegation to Chicago was sharply divided, but at the last moment Chase's floor manager announced the change of four votes from Chase to Lincoln and thereby gave Illinois' favorite son the nomination. Dennison was content enough with the result, and returned to Ohio to work for the party's nominee.

With the national Democratic party seriously divided, the Republicans had little trouble carrying Ohio for Lincoln. In October, the state elections returned Republicans with greater majorities than in the previous year; and in November, even southern counties, which were conservative on slavery issues but which were attracted by the promises of a tariff to protect coal and iron, added to Lincoln's plurality of 40,000 over Democrat Stephen A. Douglas.⁹

During the "secession winter" of 1860-61, Governor Dennison and the Ohio legislature faced the problems of a dividing nation and emerged with divided counsel. The governor watched carefully the rising tide of disunionism in neighboring Kentucky, and he carefully prepared his January message to the legislature with a view to strengthening unionist sentiment there. He favored, he said, the repeal of state personal liberty laws and the elimination of the "offensive and derogatory clauses"—the "obnoxious features"—of the federal fugitive slave law. He thought that the "discontents" which had grown up between the sections ought to be reconciled, and he was willing that the Free States should take the first steps in making conciliatory gestures. Although he felt obliged to defend his refusal to cooperate with his neighbors in extraditing "criminals" to Kentucky and Virginia, the governor conveniently recalled the legislative visit

of the previous year and its rhetorical harmony. He was, he assured his listeners, strongly in favor of the Constitution and the abrogation of all laws contravening rights of their fellow citizens below the Ohio; he was willing to yield everything to the South that "may be consistent with right, justice, humanity and the demands of a Christian civilization." Then, having declared his willingness to go the second mile, he denounced secession, declared secessionists were traitors, demanded enforcement of the laws, and added that Ohio would not allow hostile communities to cut off the Mississippi. He also asked the legislature to strengthen the state militia organization.¹⁰

The legislature responded with equal confusion. In Washington, conciliators were working for compromise, and the legislature asked Congress to call a convention to amend the Constitution. Republicans in caucus agreed on a set of resolutions declaring that the people of Ohio opposed "meddling with the internal affairs of other states," and suggested that the states should repeal any legislation conflicting with the Constitution or laws of the United States. They asserted also that the strength of the national government had to be maintained and pledged the entire power and resources of Ohio for that purpose. Democrats failed to amend the resolutions with disavowals of intent to coerce the South. The Senate also defeated a proposed effort to reconcile sectional differences by sending commissioners from the free states along the border to the nearby slave states.¹¹

When Virginia called a peace conference in Washington, Dennison consulted with fellow governors John Andrew, of Massachusetts, and Richard Yates, of Illinois, asking them if they were sending delegates. He urged Yates to refuse acceptance of the conference proposal at least until Lincoln was inaugurated. When the governor submitted the Virginia proposals to the Ohio legislature, he pronounced the terms of adjustment "inadmissible" and regretted that the Virginians had made no mention of reliance on an unaltered Constitution. After a lengthy debate between Republican radicals and conservatives, the legislature agreed to accept the invitation and, on January 30, authorized Dennison to select commissioners for the conference. The governor appointed six Republicans and only one Democrat, but their opinions ranged from old-line Whiggery to abolitionism. In general, Buckeye radicals felt Dennison had appointed a conservative delegation; Chase, one of the delegates, considered himself the only member not prepared to go for compromise. Although Dennison later added another radical to the commission when one of its original members died in Washington, the Ohioans approved every section of the compromise resolutions. However, both houses of Congress

1860 1862

1862 1864

cover by suzanne todhunter

1864 1865