

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Memorabilia from Early Carroll County Presidential Elections

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By Jay Graybeal

The Historical Society of Carroll County has a particularly rich collection of political memorabilia. Carroll County was founded in 1837, so it was 150 years, and thirty-seven presidential elections, ago that Carroll Countians prepared to cast for the first time their ballots for the President of the United States.

The election of 1840 pitted the Democratic incumbent Martin Van Buren against the Whig party's William Henry Harrison, the loser of the 1836 presidential campaign. Both parties enjoyed considerable popular support in Carroll County resulting in a wide range of political activities here. At the national level, the Harrison campaign is viewed by historians as the predecessor to modern media campaigning techniques for packaging the image of the presidential candidate.

The Carrolltonian, a Westminster newspaper that was the unabashed voice of the Whig Party, kept its readers informed of local political events as well as promoted the image of Harrison as a rough frontiersman born in a log cabin. Many of the small communities throughout Carroll County had political gatherings for speeches, barbecues and parades. For the Whigs, the most important event of the campaign took place in late September. The raising of a liberty pole in the center of Westminster kicked off a full day of speeches, martial music and a "grand procession" of Harrison supporters from the surrounding towns.

Thomas Rudisel was among the 120 men from Taneytown who marched in the procession. Rudisel wore a printed silk ribbon pinned to his coat proclaiming his support for Harrison and John Tyler, his running mate. Silk ribbons were the precursor to the popular metal political buttons of today. Rudisel's ribbon was one of thousands printed by the Horton firm of Baltimore and sold to Whigs throughout the region.

This ribbon is distinguished by a "Carroll County District 1 (Taneytown)" overstamp, making it a particularly important survival. Except for the overstamp, this ribbon is typical of the period. Printed beneath the political slogans and symbols are engravings of Harrison and a simple log cabin. Harrison (or rather his supporters) campaigned heavily on his military exploits as the victor of the Battle of Tippecanoe. The slogan "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too!" was an advertising executive's dream.

Harrison also used the log cabin motif symbolizing his humble birth, despite the fact that he was then living in a stately home. Optimistically written on Harrison's cabin door on the ribbon was "To Let [rent] in 1841". Harrison clearly intended to occupy the White House.

Another artifact in the Historical Society's collection surviving from this election is a Tippicanoe Club Songster that was distributed to Harrison supporters. Its cover is decorated with a somewhat crude woodblock portrait of Harrison in military dress. This relatively inexpensive booklet was further decorated with yellow, pink and blue watercolors.

Thousands of these songsters were distributed to local Harrison Clubs such as the one Thomas Rudisel belonged to in Taneytown. The slim volume contains thirty-five songs including "Old Tippecanoe" sung to "Old Rosin the Bow".

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Ye jolly young Whigs of Ohio
And all ye side democrats too,
Come out from among the foul party,
And vote for old Tippecanoe.

They say that he lived in a cabin
And lived on old cider too,
Well, what if he did? I'm certain
He's the hero of Tippecanoe.

Both parties held their national conventions in Baltimore which made it easy for local men to attend. The Democrats gathered on May 4 to nominate Van Buren for a second term. In an attempt to draw attention away from the Van Burenites, the Whigs scheduled a National Convention of Young Men for the same date. On the first day of the Democratic convention, the Whigs staged a grand procession through the streets of Baltimore. Despite the best efforts of Thomas Rudisel and his fellow Whigs, Carroll Countians voted for Democrat Martin Van Buren by a narrow margin. This was of little consequence, however, since Harrison won the national election.

Harrison died one month after taking office. He had refused to wear an overcoat at his inauguration and caught pneumonia. This elevated Vice-President John Tyler into the White House. Tyler later fell out with the Congressional Whigs and was denied his party's nomination for the election of 1844. The Whigs instead opted for Kentuckian Henry Clay. The Democrats selected James O. Polk of Tennessee.

Both parties held their national conventions in Baltimore again. Two silk ribbons undoubtedly worn by Carroll countians survive in the Historical Society's collection. A somewhat damaged ribbon displays a facsimile of the Grand National Whig Party banner as well as another view of the Ashland farm. The second example by J. Murray bears a rather crude likeness of Clay and a fanciful view of a young man nailing a Clay banner to the top of a liberty pole. Carroll countians voted for Clay by a narrow margin as did Marylanders, perhaps because Clay's wife was from a prominent Washington County family. The nation, however, sent Polk to the White House.

Political memorabilia from this early period is an interesting reminder of past election practices and of campaigns won and lost. The Historical Society maintains a collection of political memorabilia from 1840 to the present.

Photo Caption:

Carroll county political memorabilia from the presidential campaigns of 1840 and 1844 include the Tippecanoe Club Songster, top, and silk ribbons which were the precursor to the modern political button, bottom.

