



Lincoln Lore

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PRESIDENT LINCOLN, POLYGAMY, AND THE CIVIL WAR: THE CASE OF DAWSON AND DESERET

The first national platform of the Republican party forthrightly declared its opposition to the "twin relics of barbarism, polygamy, and slavery." Since the writing of that platform in Philadelphia in 1856, most historians of America's middle period have concentrated their attention on the Republicans' attack on the institution of slavery. This *Lincoln Lore* and the following one, however, will focus on that other object of Republican detestation, polygamy, and in particular on a man whose life was profoundly changed by an encounter with that institution, John W. Dawson.

John W. Dawson was President Abraham Lincoln's first appointee to the governorship of the Utah Territory. He received his appointment in the autumn of 1861, proceeded to Utah to assume his duties in December of the same year, and left Utah in the middle of January, 1862. His administration of the Territory, which was the home of the Mormons, was a brief one, but it was filled with controversy and not a little mystery.

Dawson's Background and Qualifications

Before he became a Lincoln appointee, Dawson had led a varied career as a lawyer, journalist, and politician in Indiana. Born in Cambridge, Indiana, in 1820, Dawson was the son of a Southerner, John Dawson, who had lived in Maryland, Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky before settling in Indiana in 1799. According to the biographical sketch in *A Biographical History of Eminent and Self-made Men of the State of Indiana*, Volume II (Cincinnati: Western Biographical Publishing Company, 1880), John W. Dawson's grandfather Charles had been a slaveholder. The family's traditional ties with the South and the peculiar institution may explain John W. Dawson's hatred of abolitionism. Lincoln's appointee received his early education in the common schools of Cambridge. He moved to Fort Wayne briefly and then attended Wabash College at Crawfordsville for two years. He studied law, gained admission to the bar, and returned to Fort Wayne to practice. Ap-

parently he found some deficiency in his legal training by apprenticeship, for in 1847 he went to Lexington, Kentucky, to study law at Transylvania University. Failing health forced him to leave, though he may have completed his course of study. He returned to his home in Cambridge to farm and run a store until 1853, when he returned to Fort Wayne to purchase and edit what had been the Whig newspaper, the *Times and Press*.

Under Dawson's editorship the paper moved from party to party. Richard L. May's pamphlet entitled *Notes on Formation of the Republican Party in Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1852-1858* (Fort Wayne: Fort Wayne Public Library, 1967) traces the puzzling and twisted course of Dawson's editorial partisanship. Dawson's advent to the editorship of the Whig paper marked a sharp turn-around in editorial stance towards Fort Wayne's sizable population of foreign and Catholic voters. Historically, both the Whig and Democratic papers in this polyglot Indiana town of Germans, Irish, and native Americans had published sympathetic articles about the liberal

Pope and appeals for funds for starving Ireland. So abrupt was Dawson's change, in fact, that his first anti-Catholic item, an assault on their stance towards the public school question in December, 1853, led to several cancellations of subscriptions and to an actual physical assault on Dawson's person. Although nothing conclusive can be determined about actual party membership, Dawson's paper was very sympathetic towards Know-Nothing principles.

Dawson denounced the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 and ran in the same year as a candidate for the state legislature on a "People's" party ticket composed of Know-Nothings, temperance advocates, and anti-Nebraska men. Dawson lost, and in 1855 he joined the Republicans. By 1858, however, he was read out of the Republican party (which, according to May, denounced him as "a know-nothing editor" because the party was trying to attract German voters) and ran for Congress as a Democrat. In



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FIGURE 1. John W. Dawson (from a drawing in B.J. Griswold's *Pictorial History of Fort Wayne, Indiana* [Chicago, 1917])

1860, however, Dawson's paper supported Lincoln's Republican ticket. Though one would be hard pressed to produce tangible proof of a "deal" to provide Fort Wayne with a Republican organ, Dawson's recent Democratic affiliations at least suggest that his eligibility for the Utah post would have been nil had he not hopped aboard the Lincoln bandwagon in 1860.

Dawson's political "qualifications" for the job exceeded any other obvious personal qualifications for the office. He had put the rickety Fort Wayne weekly Whig newspaper into sound financial shape (sound enough, in fact, that he initiated publication of a daily paper which was shorter and published over the course of the week the same articles which appeared in the weekly version at the end of the week). Otherwise, he had no notable administrative accomplishments to his credit. He was not moderate on religious questions nor careful of religious sensibilities, qualifications that might well have been sought in the governor of a territory populated largely by Mormons, who so resented, ignored, and resisted federal authority that an armed expeditionary force had been sent by President Buchanan in 1857 to calm the area. Dawson's Democratic editorial counterpart in Fort Wayne, Thomas Tigar, said Dawson was "distinguished for billingsgate [i.e., billingsgate], slang, blackguardism, and unblushing falsehood." Tigar was hardly an impartial judge, but surely some of the editorial copy of Dawson's Know-Nothing years came close to Tigar's description. Dawson carefully selected sensational articles about a cemetery's desecration by Irishmen, a Catholic priest accused of theft, and riots between Protestants and Catholics in Philadelphia for republication on the first page of his Fort Wayne newspaper. He regularly accused Democrats of being drunkards and of colonizing Irish voters at election time. Tigar's defense of Fort Wayne's foreign citizens, said Dawson, stemmed from his "passion for Dutch [i.e., German] girls, lager beer, saur kroust [sic] and sausages" and his illegitimate child by Kate Vantassel.

Historians sympathetic to the Mormons like to discredit Dawson (for reasons which will be explored shortly), but none seems to have attempted to find and read Dawson's newspaper in this effort. Therefore, they have relied more on rumor than on research. William A. Linn's *Story of the Mormons* (New York, 1902) cited the following charge, which was repeated by Harry J. Carman and Reinhard H. Luthin in *Lincoln and the Patronage* (Morningside Heights: Columbia University Press, 1943):

He was the editor and publisher of a party newspaper at Fort Wayne, Indiana, a man of bad morals, and a meddler in politics, who gave the Republican managers in his state a great deal of trouble. The undoubted fact seems to be that he was sent out to Utah on the recommendation of Indiana politicians of high rank, who wanted to get rid of him, and who gave no attention whatever to the requirements of his office.

It is true that Dawson had proved to be too much of an embarrassment to the Republicans in 1858 even to be allowed to remain a party member, but without more direct evidence on the reasons for Dawson's selection (perhaps by Caleb Blood Smith, the Hoosier representative in Lincoln's cabinet and Secretary of the Interior, the department concerned with territorial affairs), the evidence is moot. It is one thing to "promote" a powerful office-holder out of the state; it is quite another to "promote" a newspaper editor and publisher out of the state. The latter course leaves the administration with no party organ in a two-paper town like Fort Wayne. To be sure, Dawson retained ownership, and the paper's managers in his absence seem to have been of a like mind in political matters. Nevertheless, the eventual defection of Dawson's newspaper to the Democratic column meant that the Republicans had to send a new editor into Fort Wayne and establish a new paper. Such, at least, would seem to be the conclusion warranted by the Fort Wayne *Gazette's* date of founding, 1862 (see B. J. Griswold's *Pictorial History of Fort Wayne, Indiana* [Chicago: Robert O. Law, 1917]), and by its later political complexion (see the footnotes in Winfred A. Harbison, "Indiana Republicans and the Re-election of President Lincoln" [*Indiana Magazine of History*, XXXIV (March, 1938)]). Did Caleb Smith kick Dawson out of the state just after Dawson provided the only support for Lincoln in a Democratic town

and only to have to ship in another editor from another county to set up an organ of Republican principles? Carman, Luthin, and Linn have offered no conclusive proof.

The Governor's Message

Dawson did have at least one notable qualification for his job as the representative of federal authority in a territory that wanted to be left alone: he could trim his political principles to meet the beliefs and desires of his constituents. This he did in very short order. Arriving in Utah on the night of Saturday, December 6, 1861, Dawson learned that the territorial legislature would convene on Tuesday, December 10, and that he would have to deliver a message to the group. He had little time to prepare it and no time to familiarize himself with the local institutions and political developments. Dawson decided, therefore, to deliver an address on the general history of the sectional conflict leading to the Civil War, urging the Territory to remain loyal and largely ignoring specific recommendations on local policies.

Governor Dawson's message, given the limitations of time and circumstance, was a skillful production. He proudly mailed President Lincoln one of the thousand copies of the message which were printed, and he noted, accurately, that it had been well received locally. The Mormon political organ, *The Deseret News*, did review the message favorably on December 18, 1861, saying, "There are a few things alluded to in the message which a majority of the people may not be expected to cordially indorse [sic], but the greater portions thereof, including the historical reminiscences . . . will unquestionably receive the unqualified approval of all."

To get his favorable reception, Dawson had to reverse his political field and even add a comment on a rather sensitive issue to the Republican party and Lincoln's administration. Basically, he tried to sound as though he were a Douglas Democrat in principle by rewriting American history to fit an anti-Republican myth. The major device was to make American history a series of compromises, beginning with the



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation
FIGURE 2. Caleb Blood Smith

Constitution itself, which "was based on compromise." The Founding Fathers, said Dawson, "did not urge differences of opinion or conflicting interests to their logical results; they conceded—they yielded—they compromised." Other important dates in Dawson's review of American history were 1820 (the Missouri Compromise) and 1850. Of the Compromise of 1850, he said, "It seemed to buy back and settle the administration of the government, upon the principle of compromise by which the Constitution itself was formed."

The political canniness of Dawson's seemingly trite review of American history can be seen in his emphasis on the Compromise of 1850 as an event that got the country back to the principles of its Founding Fathers. "The Compromise of 1850," said Dawson, "was of vital moment to you, if I may say so, the peculiar people of Utah, for it embraced a principle upon which you seized as a protection to you in your right of conscience . . ." That principle was popular sovereignty, embodied in the provision of the Compromise which organized the territorial governments of New Mexico and Utah without any prohibition of slavery. The idea that the territories could determine their own local institutions without Congressional interference was dear to the Mormons, who knew that few people in the rest of the United States approved of their practice of polygamy.

There were two problems in Dawson's accommodating embrace of the principle of popular sovereignty in the territories. First, he was the appointee of an administration which had risen to power by repudiating the principle of popular sovereignty and by urging that Congress should forbid the presence of slavery in the territories which it clearly had the constitutional grant of power to rule. Second, Dawson himself had criticized Stephen Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act, which had applied the principle of popular sovereignty to other territories. Dawson had a public record of opposition to popular sovereignty, and he held his power through Abraham Lincoln, a man who had built his meteoric rise to national political success on denouncing Stephen Douglas's popular sovereignty as a morally obtuse policy.

Dawson's artful solution was, first, to reverse his own field and, second, to suggest that Lincoln's Republican party had been doing the same thing once it attained political office. The first, Dawson accomplished in a skillful passage in which he gracefully acknowledged that he had been overruled by the sweep of America's compromising history: "I need not say that I was among the opponents of the abrogation [of the Missouri Compromise by the Kansas-Nebraska Act] . . . because the parties to the compromise could not be remitted to their former status; but as the true relation of the great principle of popular right as embodied in the Kansas and Nebraska act, to the subject of slavery, was developed, the opposition thereto lost force, and the people virtually endorsed the measure by the election of Mr. Buchanan in 1856." The second reversal, Dawson accomplished by reminding the Republicans and Lincoln that they had, since gaining office, organized the territories of Nevada, Colorado, and Dakota on the principle of congressional "non-intervention," that is, without demanding that the territories exclude slavery from their borders. Thus the speech which Dawson proudly forwarded to Lincoln contained a pointed jab at his boss, and Dawson's covering letter with the speech contained some nuggets of advice along the same lines from the Utah governor. Dawson mailed the letter just four days after he delivered the speech (probably as soon as the message had been printed), and he concluded thus:

I regret to read Secretary Cameron's speech at the Prentice Dinner in your city of Washington—its sentiment is wrong cruel & totally at war with the ideal of maintaining the Union—and I am highly gratified to know that your dissent therefrom is in consonance with the remark of Secretary Smith of the Interior.

You have much to fear from the Spirit of Abolitionism—which you met in modifying Major General Fremont's Proclamation—and in justly removing him . . .

The events to which Dawson referred included one of the quarterly gatherings at the home of newspaper editor John W. Forney, who described the event to which Dawson referred this way (in *Anecdotes of Public Men* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1873]):



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation
FIGURE 3. Utah during the Civil War (from Colton's Atlas of the Union [New York, 1864])

Another night, when nearly all the Cabinet were public Men [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1873]:

Another night, when nearly all the Cabinet were present, General Cameron, Secretary of War, startled the proprietaries by taking bold ground in favor of arming the negroes. He was immediately answered by Hon. Caleb N [sic] Smith, Secretary of the Interior, and the controversy became exceedingly animated, enlisting all the company, silencing the music, and creating a deal of consternation.

The other event was General John C. Fremont's proclamation in Missouri (freeing the slaves of the disloyal) which President Lincoln overruled.

If Dawson had to back and fill in his message to meet the Mormons on ground of common agreement in regard to local sovereignty, he had no problems at all in regard to slavery and the causes of the Civil War. On that question he and the Mormons, or at least their leader Brigham Young, had long been in substantial agreement. Dawson's message, in its "purpose to take" not "a partizan, but a dispassionate and patriotic view of our national troubles," stated "that neither the Northern people nor the Southern people are wholly free from blame for the great evil that has come upon the nation." The real problem was the "atmosphere of passion" created by "a fanatical abolition party in the North" and "the people of the South, sensitive, hot blooded, impulsive, and fond of rule"—an atmosphere in which discussions of political questions led not to patriotic compromise after the example of the Founding Fathers but to conflict and civil war. Brigham Young was in substantial agreement with Dawson's view of the causes of the Civil War. In a sermon delivered in March, 1863, Young stated that the "rank, rabid abolitionists, whom I call blackhearted Republicans, have set the whole national fabric on fire . . . I am not an abolitionist, neither am I a pro-slavery man . . ." In 1859 Young had granted an interview to Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* which

showed a spirit of practical compromise on sectional issues despite one seeming pro-slavery dictate of Mormon theology:

H.G. - What is the position of your church in respect to slavery?

B.Y. - We consider it of divine institution, and not to be abolished until the curse pronounced on Ham shall have been removed from his descendants.

H.G. - Are any slaves now held in this territory?

B.Y. - They are.

H.G. - Do your territorial laws uphold slavery?

B.Y. - Those laws are permitted—you can read for yourself. If slaves are brought here by those who owned them in the states, we do not favor their escape from the service of those owners.

H.G. - Am I to infer that Utah, if admitted as a member of the Federal Union, would be a slave state?

B.Y. - No; she will be a free state. Slavery here would prove useless and unprofitable. I regard it generally as a curse to the masters. I myself hire many laborers, and pay them fair wages; I could not afford to own them . . . Utah is not adapted to slave-labor.

Dawson's message was not entirely a matter of concessions to his Mormon audience. One key passage, which surely is one of the particulars to which the *Deseret News* did not assent, left a considerable loophole in the meaning of territorial sovereignty:

It is, however, to be observed that as under the name of liberty many unblushing crimes have been committed, so under the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people of a State or Territory, excesses may be attempted which were never contemplated by the framers of the Constitution of the United States, to be guarded against and destructive of the great ends of government; hence, under such circumstances it should be the duty of Congress to act *pro re nata* more with reference to the equity of the case than to the question of the legality or constitutionality of the power to be exercised, a course which will be found indispensable to the maintenance of internal peace, concord and justice, each of which is an element of Union.

In this one passage of an otherwise conciliatory address, Dawson invoked a sort of higher or natural law doctrine that imperilled the "peculiar institution" of the Mormons in Utah. Mormons surely knew that there was a considerable risk that the United States Congress would find polygamy a violation of natural law, and Dawson's doctrine would mean that they could not protect their peculiar institution whatever the legality or constitutionality of local popular sovereignty.

Dawson and Utah

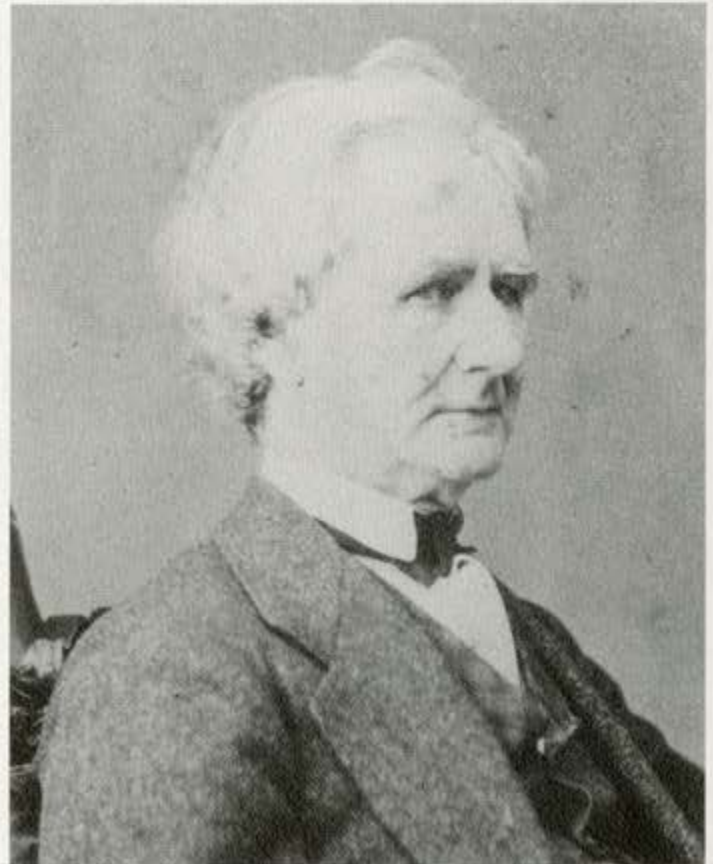
Yet it cannot be said that Dawson was mouthing about constitutional compromises while secretly intending to undermine his constituents in regard to the central question, polygamy. While en route to Utah and during his residence there, Dawson sent a number of letters back to his Fort Wayne newspaper for publication. These letters consisted of descriptive accounts of his travels and observations. The most interesting one appeared in *Dawson's Weekly Times and Union* (Fort Wayne) on January 8, 1862, although it was written on December 16, 1861, just two days after Dawson sent his message to Abraham Lincoln. Dawson described the local institutions and made, in general, extremely conciliatory remarks about polygamy, declaring that "our preconceived notions are changed with regard to its producing jealousy, strife and hatred." In a remarkably dispassionate description, Dawson wrote, "It is proper, however, to say that the second and additional marriages, or more properly 'the sealing' make a union regarded as perfectly virtuous and honorable . . ." Finally, in a passage that must have shocked Fort Wayne's Republicans, Dawson added this observation: "The people are industrious, and if there be signs of as much sensuality as I saw every day of my living in Fort Wayne, I have not seen the first one here, nor do I know where to observe such. Indeed purity is strictly inculcated, and any departure is severely reprobated." Dawson was, however, careful to leave the impression that he was being as politic as he could and that he was not at liberty to express his sincere opinions in all matters: "However, even handed and substantial justice demands of me to say that the system *has* its evils, which it

would ill become me to allude to, as the Executive of the Territory . . ." Before his firsthand observations of Utah had apparently changed his mind, one of Dawson's letters to his newspaper had indicated a rather different view of the Territory and its inhabitants. Commenting on the armies he had seen around Washington, D.C., Dawson said,

I have but little more to add except to say that after our army shall have done its great good . . . a serious question will come up as to the disposition of them so as to leave the government clear of the dangers of some ambitious men who, long accustomed to exercise authority and draw pay from the Federal Treasury, may not relish retirement to the industrial walks of life. I could wish that twenty thousand of them shall then be marched into the Territory of Utah and be allowed to select as a bounty eighty acres of land each on condition that after their discharge they should each settle and improve it. In this way Federal authority there would command respect—and in this way immigration be invited by which the vast resources of that valuable territory could be developed.

Of course, Dawson's plan would mean a large foothold for non-Mormon population in Utah.

The Dawson-Mormon honeymoon lasted only five more days after his letter of December 16. On December 21, 1862, Governor Dawson vetoed a bill calling for the election of delegates to a convention to draft a constitution for statehood. The Mormons wanted to get into the Union as soon as possible because the United States Constitution would then prevent Congress from regulating the state's internal institutions. Dawson's veto claimed that the date set for choosing delegates was too close to allow time to tell all the people throughout the Territory and to allow time for Congressional approval of the act. Andrew Love Neff's *History of Utah, 1847 to 1869* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1940) claims that the "flimsy and technical reason assigned [for Dawson's veto] was that the initiative in such matters belonged to Congress." Neff's description of Dawson's reasons is not entirely accurate, and it may be too strong to describe his reasons as "technical and flimsy." However, it is true that they did not embody Dawson's major objection to the statehood bill. (*To be continued*)



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation
FIGURE 4. Simon Cameron