

LINCOLN AND CHESTER COUNTY

This is an old county, one of the original three first formed by William Penn. West Chester is an old town too. Yet few will take note, as they pass, of the historic buildings and distinguished landmarks where so many County leaders lived, where so much of our County future was shaped.

At 28 West Market Street decisions were made that affected the Republican Party here and in the nation too. The modest brick building one hundred years ago contained two offices from which Abraham Lincoln was started on his way to become the first Republican President.

Two men had offices there and were joined in common political aim - to give to the lawyer from Illinois enough recognition in the East to secure his nomination for President in 1860.

Joseph J. Lewis, a well-known lawyer, and Samuel Downing, a printer and publisher, were both at 14 East Market Street (since renumbered 28 West). Joseph J. Lewis was born in Westtown in 1801, Burgess of West Chester for five years, delegate to the Harrisburg Convention of 1832 where the Whig Party was formed, and Provost of the Law Department of Lincoln University. He was active in a period where political concepts and governmental control where the lines were being drawn between what constitutes the two major political parties today.

One of his most famous cases was the defense of Casper Hanway tried for treason. He had tried to prevent a Maryland slave-owner from recapturing a runaway slave. The Maryland man was killed, and Casper Hanway brought to trial. Joseph J. Lewis defended him and secured his acquittal.

About the same time in West Chester Samuel Downing was publishing the Chester County Times, a newspaper later absorbed by the American Republican. It was known for its abolitionist sentiments. Hence it is logical that these two men came together with kindred feelings about the threat of slave-holding in new states.

This feeling between the slave states and the free really prompted the formation of the Republican Party and in a sense drew the line between the North and the "solid" South. The Democratic Party became allied with interests seeking to extend slave-owning, the Republican with those who wished for freedom in new states as they entered the Union.

In Chester County such beliefs appealed to a citizenry whose ancestors were largely Quaker, innately respecting the individual man. There had been an underground railroad in the country, with stations in West Chester, Longwood, Willistown, and Uwchlan, to name a few.

So here on Market Street were two men who sympathized with all the speeches being made by Abraham Lincoln out in Illinois. How they came to publish his autobiography introduces another Chester Countian.

In Toughkenamon, New Garden Township, in 1808 was born Jesse W. Fell. He went West in 1828, to Illinois in 1835.

When Lincoln was in the State Legislature from Sangamon County, Illinois, he and Jesse W. Fell lived in the same boarding house. They became friends and the Lincoln-Douglas debates were undertaken at the urging of Jesse W. Fell.

In 1858 Fell began to think of Lincoln in terms of the Presidency. He had an essential humility which appealed to people, and his efforts on the slavery questions were making him prominent and popular in the Midwest.