



ERIE CO. WAS 'LINCOLN COUNTY' DURING CIVIL WAR BYH.JOHNHILDEBRANDT

On Tuesday, Nov. 8, Erie County residents will participate in the most important activity in any democracy: an election.

During the Civil War era, residents of Erie County and the State of Ohio went to the polls to decide perhaps the two most important Presidential elections in our history. The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 was the event that drove the Southern states to secession and the start of the Civil War. The re-election of Abraham Lincoln in 1864 ensured the war would not end until the Union was made whole again.



Ohio went for Lincoln in both 1860 and 1864. In 1860, he garnered 221,809 votes or 51.24 percent of those cast in 1860, defeating runner-up Stephen Douglas by 34,388 votes. Lincoln's majority was razor thin, however, owing to a few minor candidates who also generated votes. Ohio was one of the few states in the Union to allow free blacks to vote. In the 1860 election there were 8,900 black Republicans who voted for Lincoln, helping Lincoln win Ohio and ensure his election as the 16th president of the United States.

In 1864, Lincoln carried Ohio with 56 percent of the vote, easily defeating his Democrat opponent, George McClellan.

Erie County went for Lincoln in both 1860 and 1864, joining counties in the northeastern corner of the state, which gave Lincoln solid majorities in both elections. Our neighboring counties to the west—Ottawa, Sandusky, Seneca, and Wyandot — all went for McClellan in 1864. In contrast, Lincoln won Erie County by 852 votes. Kelleys Island gave a majority of votes for “the Copperhead,” George McClellan, as did Vermilion Township. Berlin, Perkins, Milan, Margaretta, Oxford, Huron, and Groton townships all went for Lincoln. The city of Sandusky redeemed itself, according to the Register: “True to their promise and determination, the Union (Republican) men of Sandusky have redeemed the city from the reproach cast upon it at the State election (at the time state elections were held in September), when it was suffered to go copperhead, by default, in a majority of 69. The election of yesterday showed a majority of 29 for the Union electors ... this is truly gratifying.”

It is comforting to know our Erie County forbears were on the right side of history.

Ohio was considered a Western state in 1860. The term Midwest did not start to gain currency until the 1880s. Lincoln was a native of Kentucky, but had grown up in Indiana and Illinois and considered Springfield, Illinois his home. The majority of Erie County residents shared his pro-Union stance and his strong belief that slavery must not be allowed to spread to new territories.

Although there is no record of Abraham Lincoln ever visiting Sandusky (except traveling through by train, perhaps), he was a fellow Westerner and many Ohioans felt a kinship with him. Erie County's population was about 24,000 in 1860. It had originally been settled by New Englanders but beginning in the 1840s large numbers of immigrants, mainly Germans, began settling in the county, primarily in Sandusky. In 1860, 14 percent of Sandusky's population was foreign-born males, mostly Germans.

Sandusky had three newspapers in 1860, but the leading paper was the Sandusky Daily Commercial Register, the journalistic ancestor of today's Sandusky Register. In

the 19th century, most newspapers were strong advocates for a specific political point of view. Today, most mainstream newspapers keep their opinions confined to the editorial page. Not so in the 1860s.

Reading the Register's coverage of the 1860 and 1864 elections is like reading a Tea Party website on the virtues of Sarah Palin or a Huffington Post website on the genius of Barack Obama. The Register was for Lincoln and the Republican Party. And they didn't hide it.

This is how the Register bannered the election results in 1860: "The Right Triumphant," "Freedom Preferred to Slavery," "Popular Sovereignty in Operation!," "LINCOLN ELECTED!," "Cotton and Dry Goods Beaten," "The Union Preserved," "Treason Rebuked!," "The World Moves!" It is with feelings utterly indescribable that we announce to the readers of the Register, that Lincoln is elected President of the United States . . . The world has never witnessed a more manly and honorable struggle or more glorious triumph.

In the 1864 election, the Register labeled all Democrats as "Copperheads," referring to a group of vocal Democrats, led by Ohio Congressman Clement Vallandigham, who favored an immediate peace settlement with the Confederacy, including the acceptance of slavery in the South. The group was strongest in the area just north of the Ohio River, but had advocates across the north, including some in Erie County. Following the capture of Atlanta in 1864 and Lincoln's successful re-election, the Copperhead movement quickly died out.

Elections were rough and tumble affairs in Erie County. Sandusky was then a ward/mayor system of government, and the Register commented on November 9, 1864: In the 5th Ward in this City a ward which has received the invidious distinction of being the focal head of the virus of copper, our friends mustered early in force and the result is a decided Union (Republican) gain in the ward ... In the 2nd Ward, the Union men got into the poll room first, and waited for the legal time of opening. They had not long been there before they heard, as we are told, the tread of stealthy feet outside, as of two or three pedestrians: the door opened, and the first comer, with an "ugh!" started back, falling partly upon the bludgeon he carried in his right hand for support. Two or three that followed him were similarly provided. A beautiful exhibition for the followers of "peace!" But they had no occasion to use their peculiar arguments for peace as they saw from their looks that our friends were prepared for that kind of peace as well.

The soldier vote was an important part of the 1864 election. Lincoln's opponent was George McClellan, a Union general, former commander of the Army of the Potomac until Lincoln sacked him following the Battle of Antietam in October, 1862. Despite a lackluster record as a fighting general, McClellan was immensely popular with his troops, especially the common soldier.

McClellan favored compromise with the South.

But the soldier vote went strong for Lincoln, surprising many. The men in the field — who certainly bore the greatest risk if the war continued — wanted to finish the thing. Nationally, Lincoln carried the soldier vote by 78 percent. In two states, New York and Connecticut, the soldier vote may have provided the margin of Lincoln's victory.

The 128th Ohio Volunteer Infantry, whose ranks included many Erie County men, went for Lincoln 503 to 268 votes.

About 7.5 percent of Erie County's population, or 1,800 young men, served in the Union Army and Navy. A comparable number today would be 6,750.

On Nov. 10, 1864, following the election, the Register published a letter from an Erie County soldier, a Sandusky boy named William Rice, a member of the 101st Ohio Volunteer Infantry, which, five days later, on Nov. 15, was to join General William

Tecumseh Sherman on his famous "March to the Sea." The letter read in part: "As a soldier, I, like the rest watched with interest the election returns of the Northern States for the purpose of finding out whether our friends at home would stand by us in this great trial. The war cannot be carried on without your aid and sympathy — and more, never will there be Peace until we gain a conquered one." I think William Rice was a Lincoln man.