

The Flag War of 1892

By Andrew Wright

The election is finally over, but the divisive process is sure to keep the ever-growing rift of the political parties nearing a crisis point. Contentious campaigns and sharp political divides are as old as democracy. Prior to the general election of 1892, Clay Township Republicans and Democrats stood at opposite ends of a gun barrel in feud over an American flag. Violence seemed imminent in what newspapers referred to as a township civil war.ⁱ

Just one generation removed from the American Civil War and a presidential campaign in full swing, patriotism pervaded American culture in 1891 from the pulpit to the classroom. The Hamilton County Ledger reported, "More patriotism has been taught our children and teachers during the last year than any five years before."ⁱⁱ Most of the schoolhouses in Hamilton County flew the flag for the first time in 1891. Flag raisings were widely attended public ceremonies that included songs and recitations. In the fall of that year, Luther J. Haines, schoolmaster at the fourth district schoolhouse, located on what is now the southeastern corner of Shelborne Road and 106th Street, proposed patrons of the school solicit donations to purchase a flag.ⁱⁱⁱ District



Supervisor Richard Russell, a Democrat, suggested they first poll patrons' desire for a flag before they circulate the subscription.^{iv}

When Republicans ignored his suggestion and purchased a flag, Russell was irritated. He was offended when Haines asked him to consider supplying the pole as he had not contributed anything towards the flag. He was incensed that Albert Whiting, who lived on the adjacent farm east of the schoolhouse, furnished a seventy foot swamp ash pole.^v Ash was emblematic of Republicanism, a tradition that dates back to the 1832 election when Republican Henry Clay, who lived on a plantation called Ashland, faced off against Democrat Andrew "Old Hickory" Jackson. Republicans and Democrats raised ash and hickory campaign poles to show their party affiliation in the historic equivalent to the modern yard sign.



School No. 4 in 1892

Russell expressed his outrage that Republicans would erect a partisan pole on public property in a majority-Democrat district, demanding that Haines remove it. He pulled his children out of school in protest and registered a complaint with the State Superintendent of Public

Instruction. The Superintendent dismissed Russell's request that Haines and Township Trustee Alfred Jessup, who reimbursed the flag donors, be censured or impeached for allowing politics to enter the schoolhouse.^{vi}

As tension between Republicans and Democrats grew, fights broke out in the schoolyard. Children blackened each other's eyes as proxy soldiers in their parents' dispute. It spread across the district so that neighbors who were once friendly became adversaries and discord divided the churches.^{vii}

Some editorials legitimized the Democrats' grievance; "When a Democrat only objects to the pole, and not the flag, he should be conciliated."^{viii} The majority, however, were critical of their indignation. "By all means let the flag be placed on a hickory pole if that will placate [the Democrats]. Anything to secure Democratic respect for the flag."^{ix} The Indianapolis News was especially sardonic, writing that a fool-killer was needed to restore sense to the community.^x Russell visited the offices of the newspaper hoping to impart the rationale behind his position. Instead he made



MR. RUSSELL, FROM THE SEAT OF WAR.

[Indianapolis News Feb 16, 1892](#)

wild predictions, "Why, there will be a dozen men killed yet!" and demonstrated an inflated sensitivity to the partisan slight, "[It's] the most damnable crime ever committed in this county!"^{xi} The exchange between Russell and the newspaper follows in part.

RUSSELL: Some vile partisan Republicans brought down an ash-pole seventy-five feet high and a flag. The teacher, Luther Haines, invited the children out to raise the pole. One boy said, 'I don't want to raise an ash pole; it doesn't express my politics,' and that led to a discussion which has disrupted the school. I said to the teacher, "Brother Haines, for God's sake don't break up the school."

THE NEWS: Did you anticipate any opposition to a flag at the school-house?

RUSSELL: No; but I wanted to find out public sentiment, so as to keep the people united. . . . Your paper said the fool-killer was needed up in Clay Township. He is; but Republicans are the ones he ought to kill. They brought that pole as a partisan measure, and their action is condemned.^{xii}

The News concluded, "[We are] still sure that the fool-killer, instead of school teachers, is wanted in that district."^{xiii}

Russell's humiliation strengthened his resolve to remove the ash pole from the district over which his supervisory influence waned. In early February the rope holding the flag was cut and carried away under the cover of darkness. Republicans were aghast to find the flag on the ground and promptly flew it on a new rope. The next act of aggression marked an escalation in the flag war.

After sundown on February 12, Russell's Democrats chopped down the pole. Republicans discovered the felled pole around 11 pm and worked through the night so that the flag was flying in the face of its assailants on the same ash pole the next morning. They covered the lower portion with nails to protect it from the axe.^{xiv} News of the attack was met with outrage and further isolated Russell's faction. Even the Noblesville Democrat condemned the act and announced in an editorial that it was "ready to join in [the flag's] defense on any and all occasions."^{xv} To the public an attack on the pole was indistinguishable from an attack on the flag.

Galvanized citizenry from both parties armed themselves and stood guard in front of the flag on each frigid night following the attack. Many of them were veterans of the Civil War. However, the Democrats were emboldened by the nerve they had struck. A daughter of a Democrat warned that the flag would soon be cut down in daylight.^{xvi}

Their opportunity came on Saturday, February 20, when the Clay Township Republican Convention was held at the Clay Center School. Party platform and candidate selection discussions took a back seat to the subject of the ongoing flag war. Republicans condemned the "disloyal and treasonable" act and resolved that "the perpetrators should be liable to the punishment of traitors to our country's flag."^{xvii} Meanwhile a band of twenty-five Democrats arrived at the schoolhouse with a wagon full of shovels and axes to dig up and destroy the despised pole.^{xviii}

With the Republican men of the district several miles away, the Democrats did not anticipate any interference with their dastardly plot, but



Mary Whiting (Chicago Tribune Feb 29, 1892)

Albert Whiting's son saw them arrive and hurried to tell his mother. Mary Whiting rang the dinner bell to sound an alarm, grabbed a double barreled shotgun, and filled her pockets with cartridges. She stormed over to the schoolhouse and declared,

"Gentlemen, you must not take down that flag! I will shoot the first one that attempts it."^{xix} As the Democrats shuffled about nervously, she shamed their disloyalty, comparing them to the Confederates her brother had died fighting in the Civil War. When she saw Richard Russell approach from across the field, Mary marched up to him and let loose a tirade that sent him retreating to the back of the crowd.^{xx}

Their covert operation a failure, the Democrats looked for a way out of their predicament. They told Mary that they did not intend to tear down the flag, despite the wagon of axes, but rather to raise another. She replied that they could raise as many as they pleased so long as the existing flag was untouched. The Democrats attached a small flag to a scantling on the gable of the schoolhouse and dispersed.^{xxi} A defeated Russell brought his children back to school the following Monday.^{xxii}

The feud continued over the next two week as two more flags were raised by Republicans and one more by Democrats so that five flags flew over the schoolhouse.^{xxiii} On March 5 Democrats

threw a chain around the ash pole and pulled it from the ground in a final act of defiance.^{xxiv} It was raised again two days later and nightly vigils resumed through the end of the school session.^{xxv}

The end of the flag war was marked by large celebration of Mary's courageous intervention at the end of the school session on March 31. She was taken aback to find four hundred Hamilton County citizens gathered at her home. Her family and neighbors had kept the event a secret, making sure she did not see any notice of the arrangements in the newspapers.^{xxvi}

The ceremony began with a large lunch on her lawn, after which State Senator Thomas Boyd recounted the events of the flag war and presented Mary with a gold medal worth the modern equivalent of \$1,100 on behalf of the citizens of the county. Henry Caylor of the Noblesville chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic presented her with a silver fruit bowl. In a powerful symbolic gesture, the flag and pole were removed from the schoolyard and raised in front of its protector's house, where Mary could guard it until school resumed in the fall.^{xxvii}

Mary's picture and story were published in newspapers across the country. She had reached folk hero status as evidenced by the exalting conclusion of Senator Boyd's speech.



Mrs. Whiting, in other ages women have been canonized as saints, suffered martyrdom, lived in poetry and obtained immortality in the prose of history and the drama for actions much less commendable and heroic. We appreciate your worth and heroism and as a token of our appreciation we present to you this gold medal.^{xxviii}

Clay Township had been cleaved along party lines in a dispute over a symbol of unity. The Democrats lost the flag war but would have several victories in November as Indiana broke Democratic. Democrat Grover Cleveland reclaimed the presidency from Benjamin Harrison, even taking Harrison's home state of Indiana. Democrat Claude Matthews defeated incumbent Republican Ira Joy Chase for the governorship. Indiana sent a Democrat to the senate as well as to eleven of the state's thirteen seats in the U. S. House of Representatives. The Ninth Congressional District, of which Hamilton County was a part, elected one of the state's two Republican representatives.

Though it was a sensational story, the flag war was not unique to Clay Township. Soon after school teacher Emma Connors raised a flag at her Montgomery County schoolhouse in November 1891, a Democrat cut down the pole and stole it. Connors purchased a new one and consulted a local chapter of the G.A.R., which supplied her with a rifle to guard the flag. Her community presented her with a fine silk banner in a public ceremony for her patriotism.^{xxix}

In March of 1892 a flag was raised on a swamp ash pole outside a schoolhouse in Bartholomew County. A Democratic township trustee ordered

the pole cut down overnight. Enraged citizens raised the pole again and confronted the trustee, vowing to fly the flag in defiance of his order.^{xxx}

HAINES V McSHANE

In the midst of the flag war, a second scandal broke in Clay Township that made national news and whet the appetite of gossips in Carmel. Prominent members of two of Carmel's oldest families were embroiled in a feud.



DR. JOHN T. McSHANE.

Indianapolis News May 20, 1907

Dr. John T. McShane, grandson of the township's first settler, Francis McShane, was a well-known physician in Indianapolis, but he remained an important figure in Carmel society, where he kept a

home. He traveled to Carmel frequently as he was a company physician for the Lake Erie & Western and Monon Railroads.^{xxxi} He had another reason to spend time in Carmel, Rose Haines, with whom he began an affair.

Rose was married to blacksmith John A. Haines. The Haines were a large and well-established family that settled the area in 1837, the same year the town was incorporated. Newspapers were eager to substantiate the rumors that had been circulating for some time. "For many days past the editor of this paper has promised to give his readers something of a sensational



John and Rose Haines

nature that would be developed in the vicinity of Carmel."^{xxxii} Confirmation came when John Haines filed suit for \$10,000 in damages against McShane on March 3, 1892, for the alienation of his wife's affection in what the *Indiana State Sentinel* referred to as "the most sensational suit ever entered on the docket of the Hamilton County circuit court."^{xxxiii}

The case took a dramatic turn on March 14 when Rose went to town, shotgun in hand, to confront Dr. McShane. She found him at the Monon Depot around 7pm and demanded that he return letters she had written him during the affair, presumably to present as evidence in the upcoming trial. When McShane refused her demand, she raised her gun. Nightwatchman Cal. Haworth arrived at the scene and snatched the gun away before she could fire. In the ensuing commotion, McShane was able to escape to his home a block away.^{xxxiv} The incident propelled the story into newspapers across the county.

To the disappointment of those who were following the story, additional details of the affair were never made public as the case was settled out of court on May 19.^{xxxv} Neither party wanted the intimate personal matter to play out on stage before a public hungry for a

distraction from the political strife that consumed the township.

Nine years after Haines v McShane, another McShane scandal broke, this time involving Dr. McShane's brother. On February 11, 1901, Frank McShane was clubbed over the head from behind as he inspected timber on one of his farms.^{xxxvi} He suffered a severe concussion, and his prognosis was dire for several weeks. McShane's neighbor, Frank Harvey, was arrested and charged with the assault on August 31. Harvey immediately filed suit against McShane for \$10,000 damages for alienating the affections of his wife. McShane counter-sued Harvey for the same amount in relation to the assault.^{xxxvii}

Though the salacious details remained a mystery, Haines v McShane made headlines alongside the flag war at a time when Carmel, with a population under five hundred, seldom appeared in Indianapolis newspapers, let alone those in New York and Chicago. These founding families have long outlived the headlines from the tumultuous spring of 1892 and are remembered for their contributions to the emerging town rather than their indiscretions.

ⁱ "Township Civil War." *Indianapolis News* 16 Feb 1892

ⁱⁱ "Educational." *Hamilton County Ledger* 8 Jan 1892: 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ "It Still Waves." *Hamilton County Ledger* 26 Feb 1892: 2.

^{iv} "Township Civil War."

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} *Hamilton County Ledger* 8 Apr 1892: 2.

^{vii} "All about a Flag Pole." *Logansport Pharos Tribune* 20 Feb 1892

^{viii} *The Leavenworth Times* (Leavenworth, KS) 14 Feb 1892: 2.

^{ix} *Indianapolis Journal* 9 Feb 1892: 4.

^x "The Fool Killer in Demand." *Indianapolis News* 8 Feb 1892

^{xi} "Township Civil War."

^{xii} *Ibid.*

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} "It Still Waves."

^{xv} *Noblesville Democrat* 25 Mar 1892: 1.

^{xvi} "It Still Waves."

^{xvii} *Indianapolis News* 23 Feb 1892: 6.

^{xviii} "It Still Waves."

^{xix} *Hamilton County Ledger* 8 Apr 1892: 2.

^{xx} "It Still Waves."

^{xxi} "A Woman and a Shotgun." *Indianapolis Journal* 26 Feb 1892: 1.

^{xxii} "It Still Waves."

^{xxiii} *Logansport Pharos Tribune* 10 Mar 1892

^{xxiv} "The Rebels Not All Dead." *Indianapolis Journal* 9 Mar 1892: 5.

^{xxv} *Hamilton County Ledger* 8 Apr 1892: 2.

^{xxvi} "Her Patriotism Rewarded." *Indianapolis Journal* 1 Apr 1892: 8.

^{xxvii} *Hamilton County Ledger* 8 Apr 1892: 2.

^{xxviii} *Ibid.*

^{xxix} "The Flag is Still There." *The Fort Wayne Daily Gazette* 22 Nov 1891: 7.

^{xxx} "Cut the Pole." *The Republic* (Columbus, IN) 15 Mar 1892: 2.

^{xxxi} "Dr. J. T. M'Shane Dead; Ill Since September." *Indianapolis News* 20 May 1907

^{xxxii} "How's This?" *Noblesville Democrat* 11 Mar 1892: 1.

^{xxxiii} "Hamilton's Sensation." *Indiana State Sentinel* 9 Mar 1892

^{xxxiv} *Noblesville Democrat* 18 Mar 1892

^{xxxv} "Settled out of Court." *The Daily Democrat* (Huntington, IN) 20 May 1892: 1.

^{xxxvi} *Indianapolis Journal* 15 Feb 1901

^{xxxvii} "Arrested for Assault." *Indianapolis News* 2 Sep 1901