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Whig convention in Harrisburg 175 years ago remembered

By Dennis Owens

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The Zion Lutheran Church on 4th Street in Harrisburg sits in the shadow of the Capitol and is dwarfed by nearly all of its neighbors.

But that was not the case in 1839, when the Whig Party scouted the city and chose the church for its first-ever political convention.

“Because it was the only place in Harrisburg that was big enough to hold it,” said local historian Howard Parker.

Republicans and Democrats have dominated presidential elections for more than a century but from the 1830’s to 1860 the Whigs were a political force.

“If you read about the convention of 1839 often it will say it took place in Harrisburg,” explains Zion Lutheran member Todd Pejack. “It doesn’t say it took place in a little Lutheran church in Harrisburg.

In 1836, three different Whigs ran and the vote was split allowing Democrat Martin Van Buren to become president. By 1839, the Whigs sought unity in Pennsylvania’s capital city.

For the first time at a convention, three candidates sought a party’s nomination. Henry Clay was the favorite against William Henry Harrison and General Winfield Scott. There was lots of backroom wheeling and dealing. Parker says Carlisle’s Charles Penrose and Lancaster’s Thaddeus Stevens were instrumental in the machinations. “There was a heavy central Pennsylvania participation in Harrison’s nomination,” Parker said.

Harrison emerged victorious and his running mate was John Tyler. You know them better as “Tippecanoe and Tyler too,” a campaign that began in Harrisburg in December, 1839.

“They picked Harrisburg basically because Pennsylvania, as it still is today, was a must-have state if you wanted to put together an Electoral College victory,” Parker said.

Indeed, Harrison and Tyler went on to win the general election in 1840. The road to Pennsylvania Avenue began in Pennsylvania’s capital city and in the unique mixing of politics and religion the church was a winner too.

“The Whigs were very generous,” Pejack said. “They gave a rather large at that time donation of a little over \$400 to the church for the use of the building.”

The original church ledger still exists and the entry shows that the exact donation was \$417. In return, Zion Lutheran provided water pitchers and ink wells to the conventioners.

“It cost them somewhere in the neighborhood of about \$10, so it was quite the expense to put on the convention in 1839,” Pejack said with a laugh.

The church will commemorate the convention’s 175th anniversary with a special program December 6 from 2-4 pm. It has lots of artifacts to show off and Parker will make a presentation.

“It’s about bringing it to the fore again, the forefront what is really a forgotten piece of Harrisburg history,” Parker said.

“In some ways it makes us more appreciative of the things we have today,” Pejack said. “You can’t just whip out your I-pad back in 1839. You actually had an ink well and had fill it with ink and find a quill.”

History tells us that Zion Lutheran helped Harrison to the presidency, but it should also note that for nearly two centuries the place has helped midstaters of more modest residency.

“We feel very strongly about staying in downtown area,” Pejack said. “Not just because of the historic nature of the building but because of our ministry here in downtown Harrisburg.”

For the record, Harrison died about a month into his presidency yielding to Tyler. Fellow Whig Zachary Taylor won the presidency. He, too, died in office. His Vice President Millard Fillmore became president, the last who wasn’t either a Republican or Democrat.



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