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LETTER

OF

HON. JAMES SHIELDS,

ADDRESSED TO

A COMMITTEE OF HIS FELLOW-CITIZENS, AT GALENA, ILLINOIS.

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WASHINGTON, August 5, 1852.

GENTLEMEN: I have to regret that it has been impossible for me, owing to the press of business which falls upon us at this late period of the session, to reply any sooner to your interesting communication of the 12th ult. It affords me sincere pleasure to accept your courteous invitation to visit Galena as soon as I can make it convenient after the adjournment. And during my visit to your city I hope to be able, in compliance with your request, to address my fellow-citizens, to the best of my feeble abilities, on some of the principal questions involved in the approaching presidential election.

Fortunately for me, the principles of the democratic party stand in but little need of advocacy among my constituents. They are deeply implanted in the hearts of a large majority of our citizens. Illinois is essentially and unchangeably democratic. Fidelity to the free and generous principles of democracy is one of the proudest characteristics of our young Prairie State. In the "hard-cider" revel of 1840, when coons and log-cabins, with their appropriate minstrel accompaniments, frightened this wise nation from its accustomed propriety, Illinois was one of the seven gallant States that held up the banner of democracy, and waved it proudly before the eyes of the world. And there that glorious banner still waves, and there it will wave triumphantly forever!

For the last fifty years the history of the democratic party is the political history of this country. There is not a prominent event in our national history, from the first day of Jefferson's administration to the last day of Polk's, that does not illustrate the genius of democracy.

The democratic party has several definite objects of policy, such as national progress, territorial extension, the constitutional independence of the States, and the political liberty of the individual. Some of its fiercest conflicts have been for the attainment of these objects. The great

struggle against a national bank, a high protective tariff, a vast national system of internal improvements, and the distribution of the proceeds of the public lands among the States, was a struggle to remove impediments from national progress. These ingenious contrivances to control the fruits of national industry for the benefit of a few favored interests, were frustrated by the vigilance and energy of the democratic party. In other countries society is divided into two classes—the *poor*, who do all the *labor*; and the *rich*, who enjoy all the *profits*! That this country has been hitherto preserved from this ruinous reversal of the laws of natural justice, is mainly attributable to the democratic party.

Territorial extension is the work of the same party. Louisiana gave us the control of the Mississippi river, Florida and Texas the control of the Mexican gulf, and Oregon and California the control of the Pacific ocean; and all together have contributed to make this country, in a geographical sense, the most compact, defensible, and desirable territorial abode for human development, civilization, and empire, which has ever existed on the face of the globe.

The constitutional independence of the States has been an object of constant solicitude to the democratic party. Democracy has an instinctive dread of centralization, for centralization is incompatible with Democratic liberty. The democratic party has always watched, and checked every political movement having the slightest tendency to disturb the constitutional relations of this beautiful but complex system of government.

But the cardinal principle of that party—the cherished principle of every liberal heart—is its sacred regard for the natural and political rights of individuals. The natural rights of man—the rights with which every human being is endowed by his Creator—freedom of thought, freedom of will, freedom of conscience, and freedom of action in all cases where the act is not prejudicial to



others—this glorious freedom, which ennoble human nature, has been secured to America by the triumph of the democratic principle! May that sacred principle extend its glorious triumph to all the oppressed races and the nations of this world!

The political rights of the individual are next in importance. Democracy imposes no restrictions upon the exercise of these rights but such as are necessary to preserve them from abuse. Property qualifications, and all other qualifications depending upon the mere accidents of life, are opposed to the spirit of democracy. A man's qualifications for civil liberty can never be determined by the amount of his property or the place of his birth. There seems to be no good reason why a man who flies from want and oppression in Europe, who selects this country in preference to all others as the future home of himself and family, and who looks forward to the day when his ashes shall mingle peacefully with the soil of his adopted country, and his soul return to the God who gave it—there seems, I repeat, to be no earthly reason why such a man should not make as good a citizen, and take as deep an interest in the welfare of the government, as if he descended in a direct line from one of the pilgrim fathers. In this age all civilized nations are open to immigration. The immigration to a country is generally in proportion to its prosperity, and often one of the chief causes of that prosperity. The value of strong, honest immigrant labor, in a struggle between man and savage nature, on a new continent like this, where there are such tempting inducements to trade and adventure, is beyond the calculations of political economy. The principle that would exclude this laborious class of men, during the useful and active portion of their lives, from any participation in the exercise of political rights and the enjoyment of political privileges, has always encountered the steady and united opposition of the democratic party.

It is my good fortune to be personally acquainted with both the distinguished citizens whose names have been presented by their respective parties as candidates for the highest office in the gift of the American people. General WINFIELD SCOTT is the candidate of the whig party. For him I entertain the highest personal regard and esteem. I admire him as much as I do any man living for his great military talents, and I consider him entitled to the gratitude of his country for his glorious military services. But General Scott is no democrat. His political convictions are different from mine. He is true to his convictions; and for this he has my respect. I mean to be true to mine; and such is my knowledge of his character that I know this will not lessen me in his estimation. If the principles of the democratic party are those that ought to prevail in the conduct of this government, then General Scott himself would admit, with the frankness of a true soldier, that he is not the man to represent these principles as Chief Magistrate of this republic. Be this as it may, however, I stand where I have always stood—in the ranks of the democracy.

General FRANKLIN PIERCE is the candidate of the democratic party. The sterling qualities of his character make him worthy of this distinction. He is upright and honorable in all the relations of life, and peculiarly calculated to command the

respect and confidence of his fellow-citizens. Like Andrew Jackson, he has been a lawyer, statesman, and soldier; and if it should be the good fortune of this nation to have him for its next Chief Magistrate, he will, like Jackson, conduct the affairs of the government upon the principles of rigid economy and popular liberty. His course as a public man, in the councils of his native State, was always democratic, fearless, and independent. He showed himself, on all questions and on all occasions, an able and enlightened statesman. One of the noblest efforts of his life was in opposition to that odious feature in the constitution of New Hampshire—that reproach upon the character of the Granite State—which stigmatizes and disqualifies American citizens on account of their religious opinions. In the face of unworthy prejudices, Franklin Pierce battled, in a true catholic spirit, for universal freedom of conscience, and denounced the proscription of that ancient faith, which is still the faith of three-fourths of the Christian world. For this act of justice and moral courage he is entitled to the sincere gratitude of every American citizen who condemns religious proscription and reveres religious liberty.

His career in the councils of the nation was in perfect harmony with his public course in his native State. Both in the House of Representatives and Senate of the United States he was the model of an enlightened democratic statesman. The dignified simplicity of his character made him averse to ostentation and display; but his talents and energy made him a powerful advocate of all great measures for the advancement of the public service and the welfare of the country. He entered Congress in 1833, and resigned his seat in the Senate in 1842. He declined an appointment as senator of the United States in 1845. He declined a place in President Polk's cabinet in 1846, and the nomination for governor of his State in 1848. And yet this modest, unambitious citizen, who declined all these distinguished honors, and who retired to private life in the very flower of manhood, shouldered the *revolutionary musket* of his father, and entered the military ranks as a private soldier on the breaking out of war between his country and Mexico. There is a moral grandeur in this portion of the life of Franklin Pierce which reminds one of the early and heroic age of this republic!

President Polk, who was well acquainted with his intrinsic worth, having served with him in Congress, raised him from the ranks by appointing him first colonel and then brigadier general in the army of the United States. He landed with his brigade at Vera Cruz in June, 1847; marched from there to Puebla, where he joined the headquarters of the army on the 6th of August. On this march, which was very severe on fresh levies, his brigade was constantly harassed and attacked by large parties of guerillas. It was the universal opinion among military men in Puebla at that time that General Pierce conducted the march with uncommon ability, and exhibited remarkable skill and courage in his conflicts with the enemy.

Soon after his arrival, he entered the valley of Mexico. The battle of Contreras opened the campaign in that valley, on the 19th of August. Pierce's brigade took a very active part in that engagement. He himself commanded in person on that occasion, and behaved with acknowledged



gallantry; and though very severely injured by a fall from his horse—o rather by the fall of his horse—he continued in command in the midst of the fire until late in the night, when that action terminated.

The battle of Churubusco, one of the bloodiest battles of the war, was fought the next day. On this occasion I was ordered by General Scott to take command of Pierce's brigade and the mountain howitzer battery, in addition to my own two regiments, and with this force to fall on the enemy's rear and cut off his retreat. Pierce and myself, with our united commands, proceeded as rapidly as the nature of the ground would permit, to carry this order into faithful execution. Pierce was suffering dreadfully at this time from the injury of the preceding day, and, as General Scott himself says in his report, was only "just able to keep the saddle." As we approached the enemy's position, directly under his fire, we encountered a deep ditch, or rather a deep, narrow, slimy canal, which had been previously used for the purpose of irrigation. It was no time to hesitate, so we both plunged in. The horse I happened to ride that day was a light, active Mexican horse. This circumstance operated in my favor, and enabled me to extricate myself and horse after considerable difficulty. Pierce, on the contrary, was mounted on a large, heavy American horse, and man and horse both sank down and rolled over in the ditch. There I was compelled to leave him; for, being in charge of the whole command, I had not a single moment to spare; and the manner in which a few moments are employed on such an occasion may determine the fortune of a field and the fate of an army. After struggling there I cannot say how long, he extricated himself from his horse, and hurried on foot to join his command, then closely engaged in a desperate contest with the enemy; and there he remained till, overcome by suffering and exhaustion, he sank on the ground, and was carried all but lifeless from the field. This is a true statement of facts in relation to General Pierce at Churubusco; and this statement I would have

made at San Augustin, four days after the battle, when I made my official report; but the brigade having rejoined its division immediately after the action, the officers, instead of reporting to me, who commanded them in battle, made their report to their division commander; and as his report of an action, which he had no opportunity to witness, cannot be very circumstantial, I think it due to military justice to make this statement at this time, when my silence might be liable to misconstruction. Whoever takes the trouble to read my report of this engagement, dated at San Augustin, Mexico, August 24, 1847, will find the following paragraph:

"Pierce's brigade, under my command in this action, lost a considerable number in killed and wounded; among the latter was the gallant Col. Morgan, of the 15th. This command having rejoined its division, I have yet received no official report of its loss."

As I never received this report, of course I could make no official statement on the subject.

As my only object in introducing this matter is to place the military conduct of General Pierce, while under my command, in its true light before the public, I do not deem it necessary to follow him through the rest of the campaign, where that conduct has never been the subject of injurious criticism. Permit me to say, in conclusion, that, in reference to General Pierce's courage and conduct in Mexico, I only do for him what I would be ready to do for any other gallant officer with whom I had the honor to serve—that is, declare the truth in vindication of his military reputation.

I regret the unexpected length of this letter, but the importance of the subject must constitute my apology.

I have the honor to be, gentlemen, your obedient servant,

JAS. SHIELDS.

To Messrs. H. B. MCGINNIS, MATTHEW PLUMSTEAD, JOHN J. CRAWFORD, and others, *Galena, Illinois.*

## [ APPENDIX. ]

### GENERAL PIERCE AND THE CATHOLICS.

To refute the falsehoods of the whigs relating to General Pierce's course in the New Hampshire convention, his remarks (following those of Judge Woodbury) with reference to the religious test and property qualification, are subjoined. It will be seen that *whatever others have done*—for whom, of course, General Pierce is not responsible—he is entitled to the high credit of having fearlessly breasted an unworthy popular prejudice in the discharge of what he regarded as a solemn duty:

Mr. PIERCE, of Concord, said that he could concur heartily in all that the gentleman from

Portsmouth had uttered, except his last remark. It was quite obvious that, so far from having taxed the patience of the committee, his speeches upon *both the great subjects* embraced in the resolutions under consideration had been listened to with unqualified gratification. Not because he threw the weight of his high character and the power of his arguments into the scale *on the side of right* in a case where there was hesitancy—where the judgment of members was not definitely formed—where there was a shade of doubt as to the result; but because it was desirable that the grounds on which we proceed in matters of such grave import should be stated, as they had been, with singular force of reasoning and beauty of illustration. It was also a service well rendered, not less in vin-



dication of the past than the present. The motives of the fathers of the present constitution and of the people in 1792 had been placed in their true light. So much was due to them. It was also due to this convention and the people whom they represent, and due to the reputation of the State abroad, that it be well understood that both of the provisions—the religious test and the property qualification—had been a dead letter, at least as long as the chairman [Mr. Sawyer] had participated to any extent in the councils of the State. They had been practically inoperative from Mr. P.'s earliest recollection. The chairman would remember that many years ago, at a time of high party excitement, it was suggested that a member of the House of Representatives occupied his seat without the requisite property qualification. But two objections at once occurred to any action upon the subject; the first was that investigation and action, instead of rejecting one member, might probably vacate twenty seats; the second was, that no member could probably be found to move in a matter so utterly repugnant to public sentiment.

The religious test in the constitution had unde-

niably been a stigma upon the State, at home and abroad. It had been repeatedly named to him, and once at least in a foreign land, as unworthy of the intelligent and liberal spirit of our countrymen. Although he had at times felt keenly the reproach, he had uniformly referred, as he had no doubt other gentlemen had done, to other parts of the constitution as illustrating the true and free spirit of our fathers, and to these as, at least for many years, a blank. The great question of religious toleration was practically settled, and settled in a manner never to be reversed while we retain our present form of government, more than thirty years ago. The provisions now claiming the attention of the committee could hardly be said to involve an open question. They had been the subject of discussion in every lyceum, every academy, debating club, every town; and there was perhaps no subject upon which public opinion and public feeling was so uniform and decisive. The substance—if substance they ever had—having long since passed away, he rejoiced that the proper occasion had at length arrived to dispense with the form.

## GENERAL SCOTT ON THE NATURALIZATION LAWS.

[From the New York Courier and Enquirer—Scott paper.]

“WASHINGTON, November 10, 1844.

“DEAR SIR: I have the honor to acknowledge your letter of the 9th instant, written, as you are pleased to add, in behalf of several hundred Native American republicans of Philadelphia.

“Not confidentially, but not for publication, I have already replied to a friendly letter from David M. Stone, esq., of your city, on the same subject. I will write to you in like manner and in haste. This is the month when the pressure of business is the heaviest with me, leaving scarcely time for necessary sleep and exercise. I must not, however, wholly neglect your communication.

“Should any considerable number of my countrymen assign me or desire to give me a prominent position before the public, I shall take time to methodize my views on the great questions you have proposed. Those views had their origin in the stormy election in the spring of 1836, and were confirmed in the week that Harrison electors were chosen in New York. On both occasions I was in that city, and heard in the streets the cry, Down with the Natives! It was heard in almost every group of foreigners, as the signal for rallying and outrage. Fired with indignation, two friends sat down with me in my parlor at the Astor House, (November, 1840,) to draw up an address, designed to rally an American party. The day after the election I set out for the South, and have never precisely known why our appeal was not published. Probably the election of General Harrison rendered its publication at that time unnecessary in the opinion of my two friends.”

“I now hesitate between extending the period of residence before naturalization and a total repeal of all acts of Congress on the subject: my mind inclines to the latter.

“Concurring fully in the principles of the party in Philadelphia, &c., &c., I should prefer assuming the designation of American republicans, as in New York, or democratic Americans, as I would respectfully suggest. Brought up in the principles of the Revolution—of Jefferson, Madison, &c., under whom, in youth, I commenced life—I have always been called, I have ever professed myself, simply a republican, or whig, which, with me, was the same thing. Democratic Americans would include all good native citizens devoted to our country and its institutions; would not drive from us naturalized citizens, who, by long residence, have become identified with us in feeling and interest.

“I am happy to see by the Philadelphia North American that religion is to be excluded as a party element. Staunch Protestant as I am, both by birth and conviction, I shall never consent to any party or State religion. Religion is too sacred to be mingled up with either. It should also be kept entirely between each individual and his God, except in the way of reason and gentle persuasion, as in families, churches, and other occasions of voluntary attendance (after years of discretion) or reciprocal consent.

“Wishing success to the great work which you and other patriots have happily set on foot,

“I remain, with high respect, your fellow-citizen,

“WINFIELD SCOTT.

“TO GEORGE WASHINGTON REED, Esq., and others, Philadelphia.”