Alfred Avery Burnham

By Jamie Eves • December 4, 2022

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The Connecticut Eastern Railroad Museum — located at 55 Bridge Street in Willimantic — had their Railroad Days the Saturday before Labor Day, and I was privileged to be there. It was a beautiful September Day, with warm-but-not-hot temperatures and a friendly azure sky. I went to read the preliminary version of the Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Abraham Lincoln on September 22, 1862, 160 years ago. Mr. Lincoln did not, of course read the Proclamation in Windham, CT, but it is possible that Connecticut Civil War Congressman Alfred Avery Burnham may have, as he was a resident of Windham.

Burnham was born in 1819, the son of Elisha Burnham of Windham, a prosperous farmer, and his wife Phebe Avery Burnham. According to the 1860 United States Census, Elisha owned a large farm worth $5,000 (a very large sum in those days), plus another $1,600 in personal property. The Burnham family was well enough off to send Alfred to prep school at the Suffield Literary Institute, and then on to a year of college at what was then called Washington College, but is now known as Trinity, in Hartford. Burnham withdrew from Washington after one year, citing lack of finances, despite his father's affluence. Instead of finishing college, he read law at the firm of C. F. Cleveland and Hovey in Norwich, passing the state bar exam in 1843, when he was 24. In 1848, Alfred married Delia Diantha Cleveland in Hampton, CT. A good guess is that she was his old boss's daughter. The marriage was cut short, however, as Delia died in 1853. Alfred remarried nine years later. His second wife was named Mary, and they had two children, Charles in 1864 and Julia in 1869.

Alfred Burnham practiced law in the village of Windham Center, and evidently did quite well. In 1860, after Delia's death but before his marriage to Mary, Burnham lived with his father, but owned a whopping $6,000 of personal property. He also went into politics. At different times he represented Hampton and Windham in the General Assembly, Connecticut's legislature: 1844, 1845, 1850, and 1858. In 1858, he was the Speaker of the House. He served as Secretary of the State Senate in 1847, and Lt. Governor of Connecticut in 1857. Burnham was originally a Democrat, but joined the new Republican Party in the 1850s as a "Conscience Democrat" — Democrats who remained committed to the Democratic Party's agrarian economic ideals, but whose consciences led them to oppose slavery. Connecticut's best known Conscience Democrat was Gideon Welles, who also switched to the Republican Party over the issue of slavery, and who would be Secretary of the Navy in President Lincoln's Cabinet. (The fact that Welles ran the Navy Department and also had an enormous white beard led Lincoln to nickname him "Father Neptune." Burnham had a beard, too, but it was not as impressive as Welles's.)

The Republican Party was brand-new in the 1850s. It was strong in the North, had a presence in the border states, and was almost non-existent in the Deep South. It was a coalition of people from four other political parties: (1) Free Soilers, a former third-party that opposed the expansion of slavery into the North and West, comprised the party's "left wing." (2) Northern Whigs, like Abraham Lincoln and William Seward, formed the "center-left." The Whig party had collapsed in the early 1850s, and Northern Whigs brought their pro-business, pro-industry, pro-free labor ethos into the new Republican Party. (3) Antislavery Democrats were the "center-right," strongly opposed to slavery, but traditionalist in their support for an agrarian economy and small-town life. (4) Know-Nothings, or members of the American Party, were virulently anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant, and strong defenders of traditional values. The Know-Nothings were quite strong in Connecticut, having captured control of the General Assembly and Governorship in the mid-1850s. President Lincoln's Cabinet was generally centrist, made up of a combination of Northern former Whigs like Seward and antislavery former Democrats like Welles and Vice President Hannibal Hamlin. Burnham was elected to Congress to represent eastern Connecticut in 1858 and 1860, but declined to run for a third term in November of 1862. After the Civil War, Burnham reentered the Connecticut General Assembly, and served once more as Speaker. He died in 1879 at the age of 60 and is buried in the Windham Center Cemetery. He was in his forties when he served in Congress.

There is no evidence that Burnham ever read the Emancipation Proclamation from the rear platform of a railroad car, but it was an important political issue and there was no way that he could have avoided discussing it with his constituents back in Windham, even if he had wanted to. And as someone who joined the Republican Party primarily because of his opposition to slavery, not because of its stand on economic issues, it is certain that he supported the Proclamation. We can picture him eager to share his ideas about it with the folks back home.

So, I decided to channel Burnham and read the preliminary version of the Proclamation almost 160 years after President Lincoln issued it, and CERM was nice enough to let me do it from the rear platform of one of their railroad cars. They even added bunting.

(Below is a photo of Alfred Avery Burnham, along with one of me channeling his spirit. We both have beards. Thanks to Pieter Roos for the photo of me on the platform of the caboose.)



