THE STORY of William Windom's bid for the 1880 presidential nomination remains, to this day, one of the more fascinating, yet little-known, episodes in Minnesota history. Windom gained the distinction of being the only Minnesotan during the 19th century to contend for the nomination for the presidency at his party's national convention. At the time of his campaign for the White House, Windom was the senior United States senator from Minnesota, having represented that state since July, 1876. Before his Senate tenure, he had served five terms in the federal House of Representatives, from December, 1859, to March, 1869. Although unsuccessful in his attempt for the brass ring at the 1880 Republican National Convention, Windom was propelled even further into national prominence by the subsequent publicity and controversy surrounding his abortive campaign. In 1881 he served as secretary of the treasury under President James A. Garfield, and he resumed that position in the cabinet of Benjamin Harrison from 1889 until his sudden death from a heart attack in 1891.

Born in 1827 to Quaker parents in extreme eastern Ohio near present-day Wheeling, West Virginia, Windom at an early age was determined to become a lawyer. He worked on his father's farm and taught school to finance his academic education at Martinsburg (Ohio) Academy and studied law in Mount Vernon, Ohio. In 1850 he began his legal career. In September, 1855, he left his native state for Minnesota, where he resumed his profession as a lawyer in the bustling community of Winona. Windom's fame grew rapidly, and in 1859 he was elected to the first of five House terms as a Republican representing the southern Minnesota district in the nation's capital. There he acquired a well-deserved reputation as one of the body's foremost advocates of activist government, espousing a program of intervention by the federal government in the nation's economic, political, and social institutions. Windom supported such policies as positive action (such as protective tariffs, subsidies to business, and public works projects) to promote economic development; assistance to various discrimi-
nated against groups (blacks, Indians, and women); regulation of private behavior (temperance and anti-pornography laws); and the supremacy of national authority over the competing dogma of states’ rights. He was, perhaps, best known as a leader of the cheap transportation movement, which emphasized that governmental improvement of water routes was the best solution to the problem of excessive rates charged by railroad monopolies. From 1873 to 1874, Windom had served as chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Transportation Routes to the Seaboard.

The first mention of Windom as a possible candidate for the national ticket occurred in February, 1876, when a number of Minnesota newspapers began touting the senator as the Republican nominee for vice-president. Praising Windom’s reputation for “ability and unadulterated Republicanism,” the Windom Reporter observed that the senator’s “scheme for cheap transportation, the pride of his life and his State, give him an enviable celebrity throughout the country.”

2 Windom Reporter, Minnesota Radical, St. Peter Tribune, all quoted in Winona Daily Republican, February 26, 18, 19, 1876, respectively. The village of Windom (Cottonwood County), named for the senator, was platted in 1871 and incorporated in 1875; Warren Upham, Minnesota Geographic Names, Their Origin and Significance, 151 (St. Paul, 1969).


The newspaper maintained that Minnesota could not do any better than to elect delegates supporting Maine senator James C. Blaine for president and Windom for vice-president. The Minnesota Radical (Waseca) opined that “No better nomination [than Windom for vice-president] could be made.” Endorsing Windom for the second spot on the Republican ticket, the St. Peter Tribune noted “there couldn’t be a better man found in all the land. He has a national reputation, and we believe his nomination would give general satisfaction.”

The Redwood Falls Gazette remarked that Windom possessed the qualities of “broad views, enlightened sentiments, freedom from prejudice, great general information” which made for “a high order of statesmanship.” After commending his work on behalf of cheap transportation, the journal noted that Windom had “no personal follies needing apology, nor political inconsistencies demanding reconciliation; and only to those who regard unswerving loyalty to the principles of the republican party as a crime, is he objectionable.” In recommending Windom for the vice-presidency, the New Ulm Herald observed that his 1874 Senate transportation report “placed him at once in the front rank of statesmen and thinkers of the country.”

In two instances, this small push for Windom spread beyond the confines of his adopted state. One writer to the Dubuque Times surpassed the accolades...
of the Minnesota newspapers and suggested Windom as the Republican presidential nominee. Conceding that Windom had never been noted for making "buncombe political speeches," the anonymous Iowan maintained that for "downright, energetic and persevering hard work, in every measure for the development of the country, no man in the senate is his superior and few his equal." The correspondent urged Windom's nomination primarily as a reward for the senator's yeoman services rendered on behalf of cheap transportation, noting that the only way the nation could enjoy "permanent prosperity" was to open up additional markets overseas for American agricultural products by reducing transportation costs. This goal could be accomplished by establishing competing water routes, a policy of which Windom was "most emphatically the author." The Bismarck (Dakota Territory) Tribune editorialized more modestly that "No better or purer man can be found in public life than William Windom. . . . We can scarcely hope for the selection of so good a man for the second place on the ticket."4

Windom's own reaction to this spate of endorsements was contained in a letter that the New Ulm Herald acquired and took the liberty of publishing: "While I am not, in any sense, a candidate for the vice presidency, and neither wish nor expect to have my name used in the Convention, I am, nevertheless, not insensible to the many kind things said of me in the newspapers of the state. I am a candidate for re-election to my present position, and would rather serve Minnesota in the senate than to be placed on the vice presidential shelf even if I was certain of being able to get there."5 Despite this flurry of endorsements, Windom's name was not presented to the delegates for consideration as vice-president in 1876. His vice-presidential "boomlet" was thus over almost as quickly as it began, aided in no small measure by Windom's disavowal of interest in the position.

FROM FEBRUARY through April, 1879, as it became increasingly clear that the incumbent, Rutherford B. Hayes, would not seek a second term in office, a number of Minnesota newspapers began touting Windom as the 1880 Republican presidential candidate. An anonymous correspondent to the Daily Pioneer Press in St. Paul mentioned Windom's efforts against the transportation and patent monopolies and noted the senator's entire congressional career had been "a continuous struggle for the rights of the masses against rings and monopolies." In addition, Windom stood the best chance of attracting support from the "disaffected Greeley Republicans," "the inveterate Democrats, greenbackers or labor reform organizations," without which no Republican could be elected. The Rochester Record maintained that Windom had "labored harder for and accomplished more in the interests of the laboring classes than any other member of either house." Having never been "identified with schemes of very questionable propriety" or assisted in any "shameless raids upon the treasury," the senator would not have to explain any of his actions on the campaign trail. The newspaper closed with this endorsement: "If Lincoln in 1860, why not Windom in 1880?" A Democratic journal, the Mankato Review, conceded that Windom "would make a formidable candidate."6

After this initial wave of editorials, the Windom-for-President movement lay dormant for approximately two months. News reports of remarks allegedly made by New York Senator Roscoe Conkling at a private gathering of Republican leaders during the last week in June revived talk of the Minnesotan's presidential chances. The boss of New York's Republican organization, an intimate of Ulysses S. Grant, and one of the most influential leaders of his party in the Senate, Conkling supposedly expressed a preference for Windom as the party's candidate in the event that Grant decided not to emerge from retirement and try for a third term. Conkling's pre-eminence within the Republican party gave added credibility to Windom's potential candidacy. In an extensive editorial, the Winona Daily Republican repeated the New Yorker's comments and advanced its own arguments for Windom's nomination: his freedom from personal antagonism within the party; his clean record and lack of scandal; his great popularity among southern Republicans (an obvious reference to Windom's identification with the Exodus movement, the migration of blacks to the North and West); his intelligent conception of the nation's industrial questions; and his straight record as a Republican, satisfactory alike to the stalt­wart and independent elements.7

4 "Pioneer" to editor, Dubuque Times, quoted in Pioneer Press, April 28, 1876; Bismarck Tribune, quoted in the Winona Daily Republican, April 7, 1876.
5 Windom to ________, March 2, 1876, cited in Pioneer Press, March 22, 1876.
6 V.F. to editor, Pioneer Press, February 13, 1879; Rochester Record, quoted in Pioneer Press, March 2, 1879; Mankato Review, quoted in Winona Daily Republican, March 7, 1879. For other Minnesota editorials endorsing Windom for president during this period, see Austin Transcript and Albert Lea Enterprise, quoted in Winona Daily Republican, March 8, 15, 1879, respectively; Hastings New Era and Currie (Murray County) Pioneer, quoted in Pioneer Press, March 12, April 11, 1879, respectively.
7 Washington Star, quoted in Winona Daily Republican, July 17, 1879. The Exodus peaked during the years 1879 to 1881. Among all the white politicians of his day, Windom played the leading role in encouraging this black migration as a possible solution to the problem of white southern vio-
The Pioneer Press commended Windom for his statesmanship, citing in particular the senator's efforts on behalf of cheap transportation and black migration from the South. The paper was highly dubious, however, regarding Conkling's motives and cautioned Windom not to select his cabinet immediately. We fear the Windom boom is a sheer boom, to run the presidential sawlogs to Conkling's mill. The Minneapolis Tribune predicted that Windom "would make a most excellent president." However, the journal was less optimistic regarding the Minnesotan's prospects for winning the nomination on his own virtues. "As the second choice of different factions, his chances may be regarded as first-class, although he has little or no strength as first choice."

This renewal of interest in the senator's presidential possibility attracted comment from outside the state. A Chicago paper, the Inter Ocean, observed that Windom had "many warm friends here who believe that as a candidate he would carry the Northwest solid in the convention. . . . He is . . . spoken of as having a perfect, straight and correct record." An Ohio newspaper maintained that the Republicans "could make many a worse nomination. His private character is beyond reproach, and his services at the head of the Appropriation Committee and elsewhere in the Senate have been creditable." The Washington Star noted that Conkling's remarks had "attracted no little attention, and the drift of the comment has not been unfavorable to the candidacy of Mr. Windom." Even the New York Sun, one of the most influential Democratic dailies, gave the senator a backhanded endorsement: "Windom is a bigger man than Hayes. His oratory has something of the width and freshness of the prairies. Politically he is a stalwart who has still to be convinced that any Republican office-holder has ever stolen a cent of public money; withal his heart bleeds readily for the poor colored man. The Republican national convention might go further than Windom and fare worse. In any case he is a more eligible candidate than Grant."

WINDOM'S reaction to his presidential boom was one of characteristic self-deprecation. Denying that he harbored any aspirations for the White House, the senator was reported by a Chicago newspaper to have laughed at the recent suggestions of his candidacy. Back in Minnesota, however, Windom conceded that he felt about the mention of his name like the politician who, when touted for the presidency, said that "they
might go farther and fare worse, and they probably would."

Upon his return to Washington in November after the Minnesota state elections, Windom was asked about the progress of his presidential boom. According to the Pioneer Press, the senator "laughed good-naturedly" and said he supposed it had been swallowed up by those presidential booms of a more recent date. And the Winona paper reprinted the observation of the Ohio State Journal that the senator "did not appear to be in the resurrecting business, and seemed very little concerned what Presidential aspirant knocks the most political persimmons."^12

With Hayes out of the race, there appeared to be three major candidates and three favorite sons in the running for the Republican presidential nomination. The three major candidates were ex-president Grant, Senator Blaine, and Hayes's Secretary of the Treasury, John Sherman of Ohio. Put forward as favorite son possibilities were Vermont Senator George F. Edmunds, Elihu B. Washburne of Illinois, minister to France during the Grant administration, and Windom. 13

Of these six announced candidacies, Windom's was the last to make its appearance in the national political arena. During the months of January, February, March, and April, 1880, a scattering of editorial comment concerning the possibility of Windom's candidacy appeared in the nation's newspapers. These initial articles, however, originated almost entirely in Minnesota journals. The real beginning of Windom's presidential boom as an event of some national importance dates from April 28, when the following news item appeared in the Washington correspondence of the New York Sun, a leading Democratic daily: "Mr. Conkling says seriously that Windom is his second choice. The senator from New York will not admit that in the nature of things there can be a second choice, but if by some dispensation of Providence Grant should not be nominated, Conkling will labor earnestly for Windom."14

From the publication of this article to the meeting of the Minnesota Republican state convention on May 19, Windom's champions succeeded in overwhelming their opposition in the senator's home state. During these three weeks, the Pioneer Press led the Windom-for-President movement in Minnesota. A number of other prominent Republican papers fell into line, especially the Minneapolis Tribune and the Winona Daily Republican. In its Washington dispatches and editorial columns during this period, the Pioneer Press maintained that in case of a deadlock at the national convention scheduled for Chicago in June, Windom stood the best chance among the various dark horses of capturing the party's nomination. The newspaper quoted various politicians and political observers (mostly anonymous) in the nation's capital, who claimed that Windom was the most acceptable second choice among supporters of the three leading candidates. Clearly, if such were the case, it behooved Minnesota to send to Chicago a delegation that was unified behind its senior senator. 15

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14 For editorial comment on Windom's candidacy before the New York Sun article, see Winona Daily Republican, January 27, February 20, 21, March 3, 10, 31, April 5, 9, 16, 21, 23, 24, 27, 1880; Pioneer Press, April 9, 19, 26, 28, 1880; Minneapolis Tribune, February 7, 26, April 3, 17, 19, 20, 22, 24, 26, 1880; St. Paul Globe, April 28, 1880; St. Peter Tribune, April 14, 1880; Chicago Tribune, March 20, April 19, 1880.

15 Pioneer Press, April 29, May 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 1880. The following headings from the newspaper's Washington dispatches illustrate the intensity of
ALTHOUGH most Minnesota newspapers supported Windom's candidacy, a vocal minority opposed the movement. Led by the Republican St. Paul Dispatch and the Democratic St. Paul Globe, the opposition claimed that Minnesota's leverage upon the presidential balloting would be lost by voting for Windom, who stood no chance of winning the nomination. Reflecting this position, the Owatonna Journal opposed Minnesota's "throwing away her vote as a mere compliment, when it may have some weight in giving strength to a desirable candidate that has some chance of securing the nomination." In addition, the opposition asserted the Windom boom was only a Grant movement in disguise. This was the argument of those Minnesota newspapers that supported Blaine: they feared Windom's candidacy was merely a Trojan horse whereby the state's delegation would be transferred to the former president on the first ballot.16

When the state convention convened in St. Paul on May 19 to select delegates for the Chicago conclave, the Windom forces were in complete control of the proceedings. On behalf of the Blaine contingent, former governor Cushman K. Davis moved a resolution instructing the Chicago delegates to support Windom as the state's first choice, but to transfer their votes to Blaine if it became apparent that Windom could not be nominated. This resolution declaring Blaine as the delegation's second choice was tabled by a voice vote. Another resolution critical of the third-party's support: "The Windom Tidal Wave. How It Sweeps Over New England" (May 6); "Windom's Prospects. They Are Brighter Than Ever" (May 11); "Windom. As Second Choice of Grant's Friends" (May 12); "Windom's Popularity Extends To The Pacific" (May 13); "Senator Windom the Second Choice of Blaine and his Friends" (May 15); "Windom's Boom. It Spreads Over the Whole Country" (May 17). For additional comment before the state convention, see Winona Daily Republican, which continued to excerpt other newspapers, May 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17, 1880; Minneapolis Tribune, May 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 1880; St. Peter Tribune, May 5, 12, 19, 1880. On the eve of the state convention, both the Washington National Republican and its Democratic counterpart, the Washington Post, opined that Windom was the most likely dark-horse nominee should the Republican National Convention deadlock among the principal candidates; both newspapers quoted in Winona Daily Republican, May 12, 1880.16

RUTHERFORD B. HAYES, about 1879

Throughout the spring of 1880, Windom maintained a characteristic pose of diffidence regarding his candidacy. The senator's first public reaction appeared in a Washington dispatch to the Inter Ocean, printed two days after the Minnesota state convention con-
cluded. It was noted that Windom had held “quite a levee at his house” with many people congratulating the senator on gaining his home state’s endorsement. The article went on to state that Windom “is very much gratified at the action of the convention. . . . but declines to talk about the prospects of his nomination. He considers it a remote contingency only.” Windom’s only other public comment expressed before conclusion of the Chicago convention was published in a later Inter Ocean dispatch from the nation’s capital. On this occasion, Windom said that due to the press of congressional business (the Exodus Committee would submit its majority and minority reports during the Republican convention) he would not attend the Chicago conclave. With the opening of the convention only five days away, Windom confessed ignorance as to who would place his name in nomination. “He should leave the matter entirely in the hands of the Minnesota delegation; satisfied they would do what was best for his interest.”

Windom’s public air of casualness regarding his candidacy was at sharp variance with his private thoughts during the period. In a letter Windom, apparently discounting Sherman, maintained that neither Blaine nor Grant would be nominated. “Among the men talked of, outside of the three leading candidates, I have the best of reason to know that none stand a better chance than myself.” As proof of this contention, Windom referred his correspondent to a recent article in the Pioneer Press. The senator stressed that his prospects at Chicago depended on the steadfastness and reliability of the Minnesota delegation. “If we are to send Blaine men of the first, last, and all the time kind, of course there will be no chance at all.” He emphasized it would be “simply folly to go into the Chicago Convention with delegates from my own state who are at heart for someone else.” In addition, Windom labeled as “utterly false” the charge that his candidacy was merely a device to “turn over the state to Grant.” In fact, in a letter to his political manager at the Chicago convention, written four days before that gathering, Windom declared that if Minnesota’s ten votes could decide the result between Blaine and Grant, he wanted the delegation to support Blaine. Windom cited two reasons for his preference: Blaine was the clear choice of Minnesota voters, and the “magnetic man from Maine” had a better chance to win the general election than did Grant.

THE MINNESOTA DELEGATION arrived in Chicago exuding confidence that their man would eventually carry off the nomination. Because Windom’s candidacy had materialized so late, his supporters conceded he would receive only the ten votes of Minnesota during the early balloting. Once the anticipated deadlock occurred among the leading candidates, however, the Minnesotans expected that Windom would surge to the front on the strength of those delegates voting their second choice. The Windom people claimed that those at loggerheads over other candidates could all unite behind the senator as the most acceptable compromise to lead the party in November. In addition, Windom was reputedly the first choice of many delegates, who would support him once freed from their previous pledges to other candidates. Despite these optimistic predictions, however, Windom’s supporters were unable to specify the precise states or territories from which they expected their additional delegate strength to emerge.20

At noon on June 2, Republican National Chairman J. Donald Cameron called the convention to order in Chicago’s Exposition Hall. Three days later, the conclave gathered to hear the nominating speeches for the various candidates. E. F. Drake, one of the ten Minnesota delegates, was chosen to place Windom’s name in nomination. His speech was a pedestrian effort, not calculated to win any converts to the Windom banner. Drake’s words, except for his opening and closing statements, proclaimed: “We believe that the candidate which we present will better unite all the discordant elements of the party than any of the distinguished names that will be before this Convention. Mr. Windom is a statesman of ripe experience. He has served twenty years in the Congress of the United States, and during all that time with acceptance to his constituents. Four times was he nominated as a Representative by acclamation, and twice elected to the Senate of the United States without opposition in his own party. During the dark days of the Rebellion he supported the country unalteringly. His Republicanism is of a high order. He has ever, in all his public life, maintained a character unsullied for honesty. His private life is blameless. In his course he has ever sustained the cause of the oppressed and supported the Government loy-

18 Inter Ocean, May 21, 27, 1880.
19 On his candidacy, see Windom to George A. Brackett, May 6, 1880 (emphasis in original), George A. Brackett Papers, division of archives and manuscripts, MHS; on supporting Blaine, see Windom to ________, May 29, 1880, quoted in Hall, Observations, 357. This letter (or rather part of it) was not made public until over a year after Windom’s defeat for re-election to the Senate in 1883; its unnamed recipient was probably Daniel Sinclair, editor of the Winona Daily Republican and chair of the Minnesota delegation to the Chicago convention. Just after the convention, the senator’s wife asserted to her son that Windom’s candidacy had originated with some of his friends “who foresaw that neither Grant nor Blaine could be nominated”; Ellen Windom to William Douglas Windom, June 15, [1880], William Windom Papers, MHS.
20 Pioneer Press, June 1, 2, 3, 1880; Inter Ocean, June 2, 4, 1880.
ally. Such is the candidate we present to you, and ask you to support."21

Not only was Drake's speech the shortest of all the convention's nominating and seconding addresses (it consumed approximately three minutes), but it also preceded what some have considered one of the great-
est convention speeches in American history—Roscoe Conkling's florid endorsement of Grant for a third term. Nor was Windom's cause aided by the fact that he was the only candidate not to have a seconding speech. (In contrast, both Blaine and Sherman had two seconding addresses.) Newspaper reaction to Drake's speech was restrained. The Chicago Times noted that Drake "made no attempt at impression, but showed his quiet devotion to the fortunes of Windom of his State." The Chicago Tribune called Drake's effort "a brief speech of simple eulogy." Windom's hometown organ stated only that Drake had presented the senator's name "in an appropriate way." Finally, the Pioneer Press damned the address with faint praise: "It is enough to say that he was self-possessed, clear, terse and brief."22

On Monday, June 7, balloting commenced with 28 roll calls; 378 votes were necessary for nomination. The first ballot showed Grant leading with 304, Blaine 284.
Sherman 93, Edmunds 34, Washburne 30, and Windom 10. When the day ended, the 28th count revealed practically no movement among the candidates. On every one of the ballots, Windom had received only the votes of his home state. After an adjournment Monday evening, the balloting resumed Tuesday morning. On the 29th round Windom’s hitherto solid home-state strength finally cracked, when three delegates deserted to Blaine. The convention’s remaining ballots showed the following distribution of Minnesota’s delegate votes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Ballot</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blaine</strong></td>
<td>30 31 32 33 34 35 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windom</td>
<td>6 6 6 6 6 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washburne</td>
<td>4 3 3 4 4 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant</td>
<td>1 2 1 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Garfield</td>
<td>8 8 8 8</td>
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Among the leading candidates, the deadlock continued until the end of the 34th ballot when Wisconsin threw 16 of its 20 votes to James A. Garfield, Sherman’s campaign manager, who had emerged as the leader of the anti-Grant coalition. Ever since the second ballot, Garfield had been receiving one or two votes from Pennsylvania, and many considered him, rather than Sherman, the real candidate. On the 35th ballot, Garfield’s total increased from 17 to 50 with the accession of 27 votes from Indiana, plus scattered delegates from Maryland, Mississippi, and North Carolina. This Garfield boom turned into a stampede on the 36th and final ballot with anti-Grant delegates from state after state flocking to the Ohioan’s standard. The final roll call showed the following totals: Garfield 399, Grant 306, Blaine 42, Washburne 5, Sherman 3.  

WINDOM’S paltry showing at Chicago became the object of much hostile newspaper comment. It was again asserted that the senator’s candidacy was a trick to defeat Blaine and turn Minnesota’s delegation over to Grant. Windom’s failure to draw additional votes aside from his instructed delegation was taken as proof that he had no other friends at the convention, that his candidacy was a ridiculous failure from beginning to end, and that the Minnesotan never had the slightest chance of winning the nomination. In the words of the St. Cloud Times: “The Windom boom accomplished just what was intended. It stole Minnesota from Blaine. It did more. It made the Minnesota delegation the laughing stock of the Convention and the country.” The Washington Post, which only a month earlier had cited Windom as the dark horse most likely to win in the event of a deadlock, now ridiculed his candidacy:

"Windom’s ten at last became the subject of many a joke, and the unfailing regularity with which they always turned up, provoked general laughter. . . . Minnesota’s 10 votes were cast for Windom with a sickening persistency, only equaled by the determination of the other States in declining to contribute to the same end."  

Despite this lampooning of Windom’s presidential bid by a segment of the press, other observers insisted that the senator had indeed come close to winning the nomination at Chicago. On June 8, the day of Garfield’s nomination, Daniel Sinclair, chairman of the Minnesota delegation and editor of the Winona Daily Republican, wired his newspaper that had Minnesota only stayed with Windom for a few ballots longer, the senator “might have received no inconsiderable accessions.” Unfortunately, “the insidious opposition of a few men outside of the delegation“ convinced three delegates to desert Windom for Blaine, thus ending any chance of the senator’s nomination. In another special dispatch two days later, Sinclair elaborated on his claim. According to the editor, a number of southern

JAMES A. GARFIELD, about 1880

"Windom’s ten at last became the subject of many a joke, and the unfailing regularity with which they always turned up, provoked general laughter. . . . Minnesota’s 10 votes were cast for Windom with a sickening persistency, only equaled by the determination of the other States in declining to contribute to the same end."  

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black delegates who had supported Grant, Sherman, and Blaine during Monday's balloting met that same evening to discuss strategy for Tuesday morning. The group resolved to transfer their votes to Windom whenever Grant's total vote on any ballot should fall below 300, a contingency which they expected to occur at an early stage of Tuesday morning's proceedings. The first ballot on Tuesday morning, however, saw three Minnesota delegates break for Blaine. "Thenceforward there was no hope for Mr. Windom. The die was cast. His own supporters having abandoned him, he could not expect to receive accessions from other quarters even under circumstances the most favorable." 25

One Minnesotan who had canvassed the Chicago convention on behalf of the senator insisted "That Mr. Windom was the second choice of a greater number of the members of the Convention than any other candidate spoken of." This self-styled "Observer" noted that at the very time unity was most essential among the Minnesota delegation, a number had broken away and voted for Blaine, "when even the most sanguine of Blaine's friends had given up all hope of his nomination and had already begun to vote for other candidates." Had the delegates only stood by Windom as a unit, "there can be no doubt" that the Minnesotan, and not Garfield, would have won the Republican nomination. Russell Blakeley, chairman of the Minnesota Republican State Central Committee and a participant at the convention, emphasized that during the first 28 ballots Windom did about as well as any of the other candidates regarding accessions of delegates: Grant gained 3, Blaine lost 9, Sherman broke even, Edwards lost 1, and Washburne lost 1, while Windom neither lost nor gained any delegates. Echoing the analyses of Sinclair and the "Observer," Blakeley maintained that "a very large number of delegates from all parts of the country" would have voted for Windom once a break occurred among the other candidates. 26

Windom's own assessment of the Chicago convention and his candidacy appeared in a letter to the man who placed him in nomination: "I was aware," he wrote Drake, "that having entered the field after all the Delegates had been chosen and thoroughly committed I would have no votes outside of our own Delegation until after a break should occur among the leading candidates. My regret was that our own Delegation was the first to break, before the anticipated opportunity could occur. . . . I was always confident that neither Blaine nor Grant could be nominated, and my expectation was that Grant would be the first to leave the field. I still think he would have done so, had he not led Blaine by 25 to 30 votes as he did. If B. had led Grant, the friends of the latter would have sought for a new candidate, and I have the best of reasons for believing they would have united on myself. I never expected the Blaine men to do so. . . . I know I had good reasons for believing that there would be a fair chance for success, and the charge that my candidacy never reached the 'dignity of a possibility', and that it 'served its purpose in the defeat of Blaine' is not true." Windom closed his letter by noting that since the Chicago convention he had held several conversations with "leading Grant men" upon their return to Washington. "I know they would have inclined toward myself, rather than to any one who had been mentioned as a second choice." 27

In another letter, Windom reiterated his conviction that he never expected any additional delegates until Grant left the race, "and as my friends practically withdrew me before any break occurred, of course we did not get any of the delegates who had been instructed for other candidates." Since the convention, Windom had received "the most positive assurances that if the Grant forces had broken, I would have stood a better chance than anyone else." 28

Ellen Windom shared her husband's belief that his nomination had been a near thing. She claimed Blaine's operatives had persuaded three Minnesota delegates that the 29th ballot would result in the nomination of

25 Winona Daily Republican, June 8, 10, 1880.
26 Winona Daily Republican, June 21, 1880 (emphasis in original); Pioneer Press, June 26, 1880: Blaine's campaign manager, William E. Chandler, believed that had the Grant forces concluded to break on Tuesday morning, they "would have gone to Edwards or Windom, both allies of Grant"; Washington Post, June 13, 1880.
27 Windom to Drake, June 16, 1880 (emphasis in original), Drake Papers.
28 Windom to George A. Brackett, June 24, 1880, Brackett Papers.
either Grant or Blaine. “Of course, this was all a lie[,] but it had the desired effect. Our state was strongly in favor of Blaine as against Grant, and they — thinking the time had come when they must choose between the two, voted for Blaine. . . . It was very provoking that there was no opportunity for Papa’s real strength to appear. We have assurances that the two states of Alabama and Arkansas were going to change their votes to Papa on the 30th ballot. As they came early in the roll call and many were on the point of changing their votes — this might have turned the tide in his favor — of course this was not to be expected after his own delegation had broken.”

Windom is quoted in yet another letter as stating that had Minnesota stood by him, there was not “a particle of doubt” in his mind that he would have captured the nomination. As proof of this assertion, Windom cited the following statement which Roscoe Conkling allegedly made to him after returning to Washington from Chicago: “Mr. W., had your delegation stood by you I would have turned the whole Grant vote over to you. Your delegation misunderstood me, all the time. . . . I was first and last a Grant man and as long as Grant had a show, I was bounden to him.”

In his book on Minnesota politics, Harlan P. Hall, editor of the St. Paul Globe during Windom’s political career, related the following incident: “Years afterward I met a prominent Minnesota Republican who said to me that he called on Windom in Washington some time after the event, and Windom said to him: ‘Did you know I came pretty near receiving the nomination for president?’ . . . [Windom] said Postmaster General James of New York told him that the Grant forces had decided to go to him, and have the credit of nominating the president, even though it was not first choice [sic]. This was thought to be better than to allow the Blaine forces to win a semi-victory in a similar manner. Mr. James said that Mr. Conkling actually left his seat to go over and notify the Minnesota delegation that they were going for Windom . . . when some one halted him and advised delaying one more ballot. He accepted the advice. . . . This was fatal. On that one ballot the stampede to Garfield began and then it was too late. If the ‘Grant 306’ had been added to ‘Windom, ten,’ it would have carried the stampede in the Windom instead of the Garfield direction.”

Finally, Alexander K. McClure, editor of the Philadelphia Times and a participant at the convention, maintained that Windom had come much closer to capturing the nomination than was commonly believed at the time. “While it was generally expected that the convention would eventually stampede to Garfield, the movement was given vitality and form by the Wisconsin delegation. The only name prominently discussed as a compromise candidate in addition to that of Garfield was the name of Senator Windom. . . . In a caucus of the delegation, a small majority of the Wisconsin delegation voted to prefer Garfield to Windom, and that movement started the tide that gave the victory to Garfield. It is quite possible that if Wisconsin had declared for Windom, instead of Garfield, as it failed to do by only a very few votes, Windom might have been made the candidate, as he occupied a very strong position in the party, was free from factional alliances, and probably would have been quite as strong a candidate with the people as Garfield.”

29 Ellen Windom to W. D. Windom, June 15, (1880), (emphasis in original), Windom Papers.
30 Frank D. Hill to Elmer Adams, July 14, 1880, Elmer Ellsworth Adams Papers, MHS. Charles Hill, Frank’s father, was a resident physician of Pine Island and one of Windom’s intimate friends. Windom had related Conkling’s remarks to Dr. Hill in Winona during the first week of July, 1880.
31 Hall, Observations, 357.
32 Alexander K. McClure, Our Presidents and How We Make Them, 273 (New York, 1902). McClure is the only author who claims that Wisconsin narrowly chose Garfield over Windom; other accounts make no mention of Windom in connection with the caucus decision of the Wisconsin delegation. See, for example, Peskin, Garfield, 470-478; Clancy, Election of 1880, 108-115.
GIVEN THE ARRAY of conflicting accounts regarding Windom's chances at the Chicago conclave, it seems unlikely that any definitive conclusion concerning the likelihood of his nomination can be reached. It may very well be true that had the Minnesota delegation only remained united behind its favorite son for a few more ballots, Windom would have emerged as the compromise choice of a divided convention. The conjecture of what might have been in Chicago remains a tantalizing one. What can be said with certainty, however, is that Windom's 1880 presidential quest engendered animosities in Minnesota that would return to haunt him in his 1883 re-election bid. The conjecture of what might have been in Chicago remains a tantalizing one. What can be said with certainty, however, is that Windom's 1880 presidential quest engendered animosities in Minnesota that would return to haunt him in his 1883 re-election bid. At that time opponents revived the allegation that Windom's 1880 candidacy had "stolen" Minnesota's ten delegate votes away from the state's overwhelming preference—James G. Blaine.

According to this line of reasoning, Windom had perverted the will of the Minnesota electorate and served the interests of those supporting a third term for General Grant. His enemies, who included influential members of the Republican party in Minnesota, charged that should Windom win a third term to the Senate he would run for the presidency two years hence, and Minnesota at the 1884 Republican convention would again be used as a pawn. Asserting he stood no chance of capturing the 1884 nomination, Windom's foes maintained his candidacy could only place Minnesota once again in a humiliating situation and make it the laughingstock of the rest of the country. This argument was used with some effect in 1883 among Blaine partisans in Minnesota. Perhaps, then, the ultimate irony of Windom's 1880 presidential bid was that the campaign, while enlarging his national reputation, contributed to the senator's involuntary retirement from elective office.  

33 For Windom's defeat in his 1883 re-election bid, see Salisbury, "William Windom." 571-597, 599.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS on p. 295 and p. 299 are from Harper's Weekly, April 28, 1888, June 19, 1880, respectively; the picture on p. 303 is in Elias F. Drake Papers, MHS; all others are in the MHS audio-visual library.