No. 33  The Political History of Kalamazoo from 1853 to 1860

by  Bette Hall
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part I - The presidential election of 1852 to the year 1853.

Part II - The Kansas-Nebraska Act to the year 1855.

Part III - The presidential election of 1856 to the secession of the south.
THE ELECTION OF 1852 TO THE YEAR 1853

The presidential campaign of 1852 was memorable as the last stand of the Whig party in its fight for restoration and power. During this period the Whig party in Michigan, like the national party, reflected a lack of decision and definite convictions and was colorless in its ideas. The party was suffering from many forms of weakness. There were southern Whigs, northern Whigs, and western Whigs, and this geographical distribution was an important cause of their tendency to compromise. Kalamazoo, however, was Whig in tradition, and intended to stand behind the nominated Whig candidate, General Winfield Scott. The hope of the supporters of General Scott was that his military reputation would rally strength for him. Even the foreign population of Kalamazoo was urged to cast their vote for General Scott. A Dutch paper, De Nederlander, came out in favor of the Whig candidate. This was unusual because the foreign population, as a whole, usually voted for the Democratic ticket.

The Democrats of Kalamazoo were hoping that General Lewis Cass, a Michigan man, would be their candidate in the

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3Kalamazoo Gazette, August 20, 1852.
1852 election. Cass had been defeated in the Presidential campaign of 1848, but the Democrats of the village were sure he would receive the nomination and lead the party to victory. The national convention, however, decided upon General Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire as the Democratic candidate. The *Kalamazoo Gazette*, the leading advocate of the Democratic party in the village, carried an article after General Pierce's nomination, stating that although the Democrats of this area were disappointed in the choice for the presidency, "they shall rally around the Democratic standard."

While the two major parties were trying to be as evasive as possible over the question of slavery, the Free-Soilers were trying to make it a political issue. In Kalamazoo, they stemmed from the Liberal party who were abolitionists. They were first politically organized in the village by Dr. Nathan Thomas, and aided by Henry Montague. Montague organized Kalamazoo's first "underground railway"; through the period from 1843 to 1860 slaves were transported through the northern states into Canada, and both Montague's and Thomas' homes were used as stations. The Free-Soilers were one of

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6*Kalamazoo Gazette*, Scrapbook, June 16, 1929.
7*Ibid*, June 7, 1925.
the most active political groups in Kalamazoo, although they were a small minority and were looked upon as fanatics by their fellow-citizens. The Free-Soil convention named for their candidate for president, John P. Hale, of New Hampshire, who had left the Democratic party on the admission of Texas. 8

The election of 1852 was a success for the Democrats. In Michigan the winning party secured an almost equal half of the total votes cast for President. Kalamazoo, however, gave its votes with a majority of four to Scott. The Democrats who had supported the Compromise measures, were thus triumphantly sustained. The Democrats of Kalamazoo hoped that this settled the slavery question with finality.

The year 1853 found the temperance question before the citizens of Kalamazoo. A notice from the sheriff's office appeared in the Gazette, notifying voters that an election would be held on the third Monday in June in the townships of Kalamazoo County in pursuance of "an act prohibiting the manufacturing of intoxicating beverages and traffic therein." The town election went off quietly and the result was 410 for the law and 117 against it. This established prohibition locally, and the Gazette began to publish the names of offenders

8 Bryant, op.cit., p.403.
9 Fuller, op.cit., p.307.
10 Kalamazoo Gazette, November 6, 1852.
11 Ibid, March 11, 1853.
12 Ibid, June 24, 1853.
of the new law.

The township election also went off in a quiet manner. A slight vote was polled, which in connection with the fact that a strong hostility was manifested by some Democrats toward a portion of the Democratic ticket caused the defeat of that party's nominees for supervisor and treasurer. The Whigs carried the election. There was also an election of the Board of Supervisors for the county. It resulted in 5 Democrats, 6 Whigs, and 5 Free-Soilers.

13 Ibid, April 8, 1853.
14 Ibid.
At the close of 1853, President Pierce spoke of the repose which had followed the compromises and said that this was the way he intended it to remain until his term was ended. However, 1854 was to see a renewal of the slavery question in the form of a bill introduced by Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois. The bill was introduced into the senate early in January as the Nebraska bill and after an amendment became known as the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This bill re-opened the slavery question and Kalamazoo's citizens began actively to take sides on the question.

The Gazette, which adhered to the policy of Douglas, agitated for the bill's passage and defended it from all criticism. The Gazette maintained that slavery was not a national question but a matter to be settled locally. The bill was praised by the paper because it kept the slavery question out of Congress and up to the settlers of the territory. The bill was attacked in Kalamazoo by the members of the Free-Soil Party as well as other groups. In March, 1854, an Anti-Nebraska meeting was held to protest against its passage, and among those present at the meeting were four members of the Democratic party. Despite protests,

15 Bryant, op. cit., p.405.
16 Kalamazoo Gazette, July 14, 1854.
17 Ibid, March 10, 1854.
the bill was passed May 25, 1854, after a most excited
discussion in both houses.

A few months later a new national party appeared on the
scene. It was at the large Free-Soil convention in Kalamazoo
on June 21, 1854, that the members decided to hold an in-
dependent convention at Jackson, Michigan on July 6th. It
was, in part, as a result of this Jackson meeting that the
new Republican party was formed. Kalamazoo's David S.
Walbridge was chosen Chairman of the Jackson convention.
The following policy was drawn up:

That in view of the necessity of battling for
the first principles of republican
government and against the schemes of an
aristocracy, the most revolting and oppressive
with which the earth was ever cursed or man
debased, we will cooperate and be known
as the Republicans until the contest be
terminated. 18

The Gazette, as was expected, had little faith in this
new party, and believed it to be made up of "...Garrisonian
Disunionists and Saviors of the union, Traitorous Democrats
and Recreant Whigs, Moderate Free-Soilers and Abolitionists
...in short, it was an aggregation of all the antagonistic
elements in the world." 19

The new Republican party was formed chiefly because of

18 Fuller, op. cit., p.309.
19 Kalamazoo Gazette, July 14, 1854.
the disintegration of the Whigs. On October 6, 1854, this element in Kalamazoo took the critical step of fusing with the Free-Soilers. Here the Gazette states the Whigs played second fiddle to a handful of Abolitionists who had assembled in what they called a mass meeting in the courtyard below. In the inside there were seventy or eighty of the best Whigs in the country, who had been sent to represent the invincible Whig party of the Banner County. Here the thirty Free-Soilers broke in on the meeting. They told the Whigs that they were a committee sent to meet a committee of Whigs to decide upon the candidates that should be placed on the county ticket. The committee was formed and they soon reported that they proposed that one Whig and one Abolition delegate from each township should be chosen by the respective conventions to determine upon the candidates for the county ticket. The Gazette thought this said little for the "invincible Whigs" and stated that as a result of this meeting the 300 Abolitionists in the county had an equal vote with the 1500 Whigs. The Whig party had now really merged with the Abolitionists and were called the Fusion party.

In the Fusion Congressional convention, the Whigs and

20 Patricia Schillinger, Social and Political Reactions to the Slavery Question in Kalamazoo, History Seminar Paper of Kalamazoo College, College Library, p. 39
21 Kalamazoo Gazette, October 6, 1854.
22 Ibid, October 6, 1854.
Abolitionists nominated D.S.Walbridge for their candidate for Congress. This the Gazette could not understand, because Walbridge was an old party Whig. He believed the fugitive slave law should be modified, the paper alleged, but he never actually denounced it. The Abolitionists had nominated an extreme Conservative and this was proof of their insincerity and lack of policy, it added.

The Fusion party became very active in Kalamazoo. The Gazette liked to link the name of Whig-Abolition party with the rapidly rising group, the Know-Nothings, and an announcement appeared in October that the three groups were celebrating their victories in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana. On October 20th, the noted Abolitionist, Joshua R.Giddings spoke in Kalamazoo. The Gazette carried parts of his speech and spoke of the fact that Mr. Giddings went so far as to advise fugitive slaves to murder their masters. The paper claimed that since Mr. Giddings' speech many Whigs were declaring that they were finished with Abolition.

Before the general election of November, the Democrats played up the fact that some of the Whig-Free-Soilers' names were found on a discovered Know-Nothing circular. The Democratic paper wanted the citizens of Kalamazoo to know about the

23 Ibid, October 6, 1854.
24 Ibid, October 20, 1854.
25 Ibid, October 27, 1854.
circular and thought this was a chance to show the public what the Fusion party stood for. Two of the important names found on it were Walbridge, on the Congressional ticket, and Bancroft, who was running for secretary of state. For weeks the Democrats talked about the Know-Nothing policy and its connection with the Fusion ticket. **The Gazette** stated:

The Free-Soilers are supposed to stand for welcoming immigrants and exiles, as the Democrats, and yet nine of the Fusion candidates are found to be Know-Nothings which have taken an oath that if they are elected they will, if it can be done legally, remove all Foreigners, Aliens, and Roman Catholics from office and they will not appoint such to office. 27

The Democrats and Know-Nothings held meetings and rallies prior to the election and the Democrats were sure the exposure of the Know-Nothing ticket would mean their victory.

The result of the election, however, proved just the opposite. The Fusionists were successful. To the Democrats this meant the following:

1. Restoration of the Missouri Compromise.
2. Total repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law.
3. Application of the Wilmot Proviso to all

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26 Ibid, October 27, 1854.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid, November 10, 1854.
territory where slavery is not already excluded.

4. Prevention of the admission of any more states into the union which recognized slavery.

The Detroit Advertiser said it was not a Whig or Republican victory. It was a combination of Whig, Republican and Know-Nothing united in strength. The results in this congressional district were:

David S. Walbridge (Fusion) - 12,865
Samuel Clark (Democrat) - 10,178
Scattering - 20
Imperfect - 1

Walbridge's majority - 2,687. The Fusion State Ticket had from a 6,000 to an 8,000 majority. The party celebrated in the village with an enthusiastic meeting, ending up with a torchlight procession.

The excitement of the election passed and the people of Kalamazoo were told by the Detroit Gazette that the Fusion-Know-Nothing party was "completely overthrown in the state, and only in a few Whig strongholds were there any majorities.

29 Ibid., November 10, 1854.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., December 29, 1854.
32 Ibid., November 17, 1854.
33 Ibid., April 18, 1855.
The township election was an unenthusiastic showing. Although there were nearly 1,000 voters in the township, only 537 votes were polled. There was little interest felt in this result by the public at large. No issue, not even temperance, was presented. Both tickets were composed of names of good men, and there were Democrats at work for the Fusion ticket and Fusionists at work for the Democratic ticket. But never had there been an election where so little excitement prevailed, it was said. Mr. A. Cameron was elected supervisor on the Fusion ticket, defeating Mr. A. Ransom, the Democratic candidate. The Fusion ticket was victorious except for Mr. L.C. Starkley, for treasurer, and Mr. A. C. Balch for constable.

The year 1855 found the pages of the Gazette filled with articles about the Kansas struggle and the non-intervention policy which the paper advocated. The following is an example:

In the true spirit of the Kansas bill our anxiety has been consistent and earnest that all outside influences could be withheld and that the bona fide inhabitants be allowed to adopt or reject slavery, according to their own views of interest and propriety... No man can justly claim to be a friend of non-intervention or popular sovereignty who desires to see the territory either adopt or reject slavery under any type of outside influence whatever.

A mass meeting of Fusionists was held in Kalamazoo

34 Ibid, April 6, 1855.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid, November 16, 1855.
in September. The "Kansas-Swindle," the Missouri Mob, and the "atrocities of the slave powers, were discussed at the meeting. There were in attendance five hundred men, two hundred of whom were from Michigan.

The people of Kalamazoo were awake to the Kansas question and a company of emigrants were formed in the vicinity of Kalamazoo in March, with the intention of settling in Kansas.

37 Ibid., September 7, 1855.
38 Ibid., March 23, 1855.
THE ELECTION OF 1856
TO THE SECESSION OF
THE SOUTH

As early as February in 1856, Kalamazoo's political
parties were active in working toward a victory in the
presidential election. The Gazette was urging the Democrats
to take action:

Our opponents in this township are already
openly and secretly organized and they are
extending their efforts in every school
district. 39

The Know-Nothings were the first officially to open
the political campaign. At their convention, held
February 23rd, they nominated Millard Fillmore for
President, and Andrew Jackson Donelson for Vice-President.
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Their policy was American for Americans.

Political clubs began to spring up early. In the
first part of March a Democratic meeting was held at the
office of Balch and DeYoe for the purpose of forming
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a club. A few weeks later there was a meeting of the
Democratic Association of Kalamazoo. At this meeting
the members elected officers and drew up a creed in
answer to the Whig-Fusion-Know-Nothing-Republican party.

39 Ibid, February 29, 1856.
40 Ibid, March 7, 1856.
41 Ibid, March 28, 1856.
The officers elected were:

President - Hon. E. Ransom

Vice-President - N.A. Balch, Volney Hascall (Editor of Gazette)

Secretary - G. Brown

Treasurer - Alexander Buell, Esq.

The following creed was adopted:

1. All political power is inherent in the people.

2. No religious tests as qualification for office and no exclusion because of birth.

3. The belief that man can govern himself.

4. Against all secret organizations.

5 Belief in liberal naturalization laws.

The township election resulted in a complete "Fusion" victory. But town politics were soon swallowed up in the National Conventions. In June the Democrats presented as their candidate for the presidency, James Buchanan and for vice-president, John Breckinridge. Soon after this convention, the Republicans began their first national campaign by nominating John Fremont for president and Francis P. Blair for vice president.

42 Ibid, August 1, 1856.
The months leading up to the election were filled with meetings and party mud-slinging. The Democrats were saying that to elect Fremont would be to elect disunion. The Republicans were saying that the Democrats were for the extension of slavery. Both parties did their share of mud-slinging. The Republicans of Kalamazoo formed a Young Man's Fremont Club and were active in holding meetings. On August 27th a large Republican rally was held in Kalamazoo. A young man came to speak on behalf of John Fremont: his name was Abraham Lincoln. So far as it is known this was the only time Lincoln was ever in Michigan. His Kalamazoo address was not especially pleasing to Republican leaders, because they had expected a fiery address and instead heard a well-balanced, logical talk against further extension of slavery into the territories, coupled with a strong plea for preservation of the union.

The Democrats of the village were angry because the Republicans would not allow them to use the cannon to announce their victories in parts of the country, as had

43Ibid., August 15, 1856.
44 Fuller, op.cit., p.312
45Kalamazoo Gazette, August 8, 1856.
been the custom. The cannon had been purchased by the Whigs but until this year both parties had used it. The Democrats decided to buy their own cannon and fired at receipt of dispatches of victory in any part of the United States.

Many ministers of the village began to take up the Kansas question as a moral crusade, and began to support the Republican party. Many articles appeared in the Gazette accusing the ministers of religion of becoming ministers of politics. The Gazette stated that the most lamentable feature of the present campaign is the wide-spread participation in political controversies by the clergymen of various religious denominations.

Election day finally arrived and it turned out to be an exciting day, as the following article from the Gazette describes:

A band of students attending the Baptist Theological Seminary and College, many of which were not entitled to vote formed themselves in regular order and marching up to the polls swore in their votes. After which they simultaneously gave three groans for 10% Jimmy Buchanan and then marching up to the residence of Senator Stuart, saluted that gentlemen with three groans.

46 Ibid. September 5, 1856.
47 Ibid. October 24, 1856.
48 Ibid. November 7, 1856.
49 Ibid.
Although Kalamazoo and Michigan gave their votes to Fremont, James Buchanan became the President of the United States. Only one Michigan county, Wayne, went Democratic.

The Republicans' hopes were not dimmed by losing the presidential election, and soon after the polls were closed and the results published, the Young Men's Fremont Club was talking about Fremont's nomination for the 1860 campaign.

The Democrats celebrated their victory by holding a festival at the Fireman's Hall, and then dining at the Kalamazoo House. There were speeches, songs, and toasts to "Old Buck" and "Young Breck."

The new year opened with talk of land grants. The people of the village were urged to watch the legislature closely. The Gazette was advocating that the money should go to the primary schools and to clear up the state indebtedness. The paper accused Lansing of being full of speculators and corruption.

The people of Kalamazoo were watching Buchanan's

50 Ibid, November 21, 1856.
51 Ibid, November 28, 1856.
52 Ibid, January 22, 1857.
54 Ibid, April 10, 1857.
policy in Kansas and the territory was once again the topic of the day. Buchanan's support of the Lecompton Constitution, which was drawn up by the pro-slavery faction, was causing disruption in the Democratic party. The *Gazette* carried the statement that the party was becoming "broken and disorganized in ranks." The two papers in Kalamazoo repudiated the Constitution.

Most of 1857 was devoted to the local situation—union school building, intemperance, swamp lands, and railroads. There had been serious crop failures in northern Michigan and Kalamazoo was busy helping out her neighbors. The terrible conditions of industry and banking in this year of panic and depression were not felt in Kalamazoo.

The Republican administration of the state was being charged with increased taxes and an empty treasury. The year 1858 opened with the *Gazette* publishing the state auditor's report, which revealed the traveling expenses of some of the state officials. The Democrats of Kalamazoo

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55 Schillinger, *op. cit.*, p.41
56 *Kalamazoo Gazette*, October 2, 1857.
57 Fuller, *op. cit.*, p.312.
58 *Kalamazoo Gazette*, May 28, 1858.
kept charging the Republicans with extravagance, but after
the passage of the Kansas bill in May, the Gazette noticed
a more friendly atmosphere.

In July, the Republicans of Kalamazoo began talking
about David S. Walbridge for U.S. Senator. The contest
seemed to be growing around Kinsley Bingham and Walbridge,
and for governor, H.G.Wells. The parties became busy
with nominating caucuses and county and state conventions.
Charles Stuart was the choice of the Democrats for governor.

A new ticket was presented to the voters of Kalamazoo.
It was a result of a split among the Republicans over
their ticket. The new ticket was called the People's
ticket and it was backed by Republicans cooperating with
the Democratic party. Their candidate for Senator was
Mr. J. Stone. The state elections were a victory for the
Republicans, but Stone of the People's ticket was elected.
Kalamazoo County voted straight Republican. The state
election of 1858 proved to be another Republican victory,

59 Ibid, July 23, 1858.
60 Ibid, August 20, 1858.
61 Ibid, October 29, 1858.
62 Ibid, November 5, 1858.
63 Schillinger, op. cit., p.42.
64 Fuller, op. cit., p.312.
but this time it was by a decreased majority.

There were events, other than the election, that the Gazette and the villagers concerned themselves with in 1858. The people were talking about the Mormon uprisings in Utah and talk of secession kept creeping into the news. In 1858, however, secession still was just talk to the average man in Kalamazoo.

The opening of 1859 found the question of a city charter before the citizens of Kalamazoo. They were asked by their representative to tell him what kind of a charter they wanted. Before he could take any action there were questions that had to be answered, concerned with city limits, a board of education and a city auditor. The population of Kalamazoo split on this issue. A considerable number were in favor of becoming a city, but many were opposed to the charter. Opposition arose over the proposed boundaries, and over the fear that taxes might be largely increased by the contemplated change. The people of the village actually knew little about the provisions of the charter and so the Gazette sent to the legislature asking for a copy to lay before the people.

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65 Kalamazoo Gazette, January 7, 1859.
66 Ibid, January 21, 1859.
67 Ibid.
The citizens, because little was known about the charter, petitioned instead for an enlargement of the corporate limits of the village. A bill amending the village charter passed both houses of the legislature in the early part of February. It consisted of:

1. Extension of village limits in accordance with the petition.
2. Making the position of marshal elective by the people.
3. Giving the village board power to license and tax at discretion, transient auctions.
4. Establishment of a board of education.

In the later part of February a new law was placed before the people — the Registry law. It meant registration of qualified voters of the state. The Republicans were pushing the law, but the Democrats believed it to be an infringement of the constitution.

In the county elections Kalamazoo voted Republican for all offices except that of treasurer. Charles H. Brown was the Democrat elected to fill that position. George Martin, Republican Chief Justice, received a majority of 184.

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68 Ibid. January 28, 1859.
69 Ibid. February 11, 1859.
70 Ibid. February 25, 1859.
71 Ibid. April 8, 1859.
The summer began to be filled with talk about the forthcoming presidential election. News also reached Kalamazoo of war in Europe, and the Gazette began to carry articles following the war. In late June the U.S. Land Office, which had been located in Kalamazoo, was discontinued, and the remaining public lands were transferred to the care of the Ionia office.

In July the Gazette carried the names of the leading men of all parties for the next presidency. The Democrats were talking about Stephen A. Douglas, who had become even more of a national figure during his debates with Lincoln. The Republicans were behind William Seward, and the Know-Nothings preferred J.J. Crittenden. The Gazette was filled with words of praise for Douglas and carried the speeches he was delivering on his tour.

In the year 1860, the country approached the canvass for the next presidency with a distinct understanding of the threat of the extreme southern leaders, which was that the success of the Republican party should be the signal for disunion. This election was to be an important one, and the citizens of Kalamazoo were aware of this.

72 Ibid., June 24, 1859.
73 Ibid., July 25, 1859.
74 Ibid., September 23, 1859.
75 Bryant, op. cit., p. 432.
In February they were being urged by their papers to be sure and register and not lose their votes.

The Republican State Convention was held in June and Austin Blair was nominated for Michigan's next governor. The Democrats nominated J.S. Barry. But soon the state conventions took a back seat to the national conventions.

The Republican leaders in Michigan in 1860 were committed to the nomination of William H. Seward for president. When Lincoln was nominated on the third ballot, the chairman of the Michigan delegation, Austin Blair, seconding the motion to make the nomination unanimous, stated that "Michigan from first to last has cast her vote for the great statesman from New York." Nevertheless, he promised that the election would give the electoral vote of his state for the Illinois Rail Splitter.

The Northern Democrats announced their candidate to be Stephen A. Douglas. At the national convention, however, most of the Souther Democrats withdrew and nominated their own candidate, John C. Breckinridge.

Campaign clubs began to be organized in Kalamazoo, and the Gazette began to expound the merits of Douglas

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76 Kalamazoo Gazette, February 10, 1860.
77 Fuller, op. cit., p. 313.
78 Bryant, op. cit., p. 433.
and the Democratic party. It also carried poems and editorials about Lincoln, many times poking fun at his pictures. The Democrats were saying that Lincoln was a good man, but he lacked breadth, industry and distinction. The Gazette wanted Kalamazoo to understand what the major parties and their candidates in the election stood for:

Lincoln - demands settlement of slavery question and wants it abolished in every state.

This latter was unfair to Lincoln

Breckinridge - Advocates slavery

Douglas - leaves slavery up to the individual state.

The last days before election were spent discussing issues and candidates and the papers were giving the population last minute reminders to vote.

On November 9th the news of Lincoln's election reached Kalamazoo. His election in the nation as a whole was accomplished by a minority vote, but in Michigan, the Republicans had more than a 20,000 clear majority. The Republicans elected Austin Blair for governor, filled four seats in Congress, and left few seats to their opponents in

80 Ibid, August 10, 1860.
81 Ibid, November 9, 1860.
either house of legislature. Kalamazoo, like the rest of Michigan, followed her traditional way of voting.

The contest was over, but in truth it was just the start, for the next week after the election, the Gazette carried the news that the secessionists were holding a meeting in Georgia and they thought that the talk of secession might be more than just an alarm.

On December 20th, Kalamazoo received word that South Carolina had seceded. The events that preceded the war were followed closely by Kalamazoo citizens. As early as 1861 the Gazette began to carry a column entitled, "Progress of the Secession Movement," and continued this until the war began.

When the guns were sounded, Kalamazoo rallied quickly and strongly to the cause of the Union. A sturdily Republican community for several years, it supported the national Republican administration readily and naturally.

\[82\] Fuller, op. cit., p. 313.
\[83\] Kalamazoo Gazette, November 16, 1860.
\[84\] Ibid., January 4, 1861.
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