BIOGRAPHY OF HEZEKIAH G. WELLS

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January 23, 1958
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On a hot day in July, 1833, a special train entered the county of Kalamazoo; it was no ordinary train -- for there was no Pullman on it -- the train consisted of two horses. Mounted on one horse was Bezaleel Wells, and on the other, his twenty-one year old son, Hezekiah. The two men had left their home town on the banks of the Ohio river with a team of oxen, a wagon with plows and other farming utensils, and two or three boxes, one of which contained a miniature library: Paley's Moral Philosophy, Burns' Poems, Jefferson's Notes on Virginia, Pilgrim's Progress, Robinson Crusoe, and a half dozen law books. The personal possessions of Hezekiah consisted of a blanket overcoat and a pair of woolen socks, one shirt, one razor, and one small type, red morocco bound New Testament, all contained in a pair of saddle-bags. The unique train came to a stop in the southern part of Kalamazoo county.

Bezaleel Wells was born at Baltimore, Maryland, on April 4, 1768, of English descent; his great-grandfather, James Wells, was born in England in 1700, and moved to Baltimore in 1725. Bezaleel's wife, Sarah, was also a native of Baltimore. Bezaleel and Sarah later moved West, to the village of Steubenville, Ohio, situated on the

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banks of the Ohio River. The village was built on the site of old Fort Steuben, erected in 1787, and named after Baron von Steuben, Prussian soldier and American general during the wars of the Revolution. Bezaleel achieved prominence in the state, and at one time was the largest land owner in Ohio. In 1802 he was a member of the Ohio Constitutional Convention. ¹

On June 16, 1812, Sarah Wells gave birth to a son, Hezekiah G. Wells, who was to follow in his father's footsteps as a delegate to a Constitutional Convention. Hezekiah was brought up in Steubenville, and educated at Kenyon College, in Knox County, Ohio. Upon his graduation from the Episcopalian school, Hezekiah read law in the office of James and Daniel L. Collier at Steubenville, and was admitted to the bar in 1832. In the same year, 1832, his father failed at business, and the family were thrown upon their own resources. ² The following year Bezaleel, accompanied by Hezekiah and a Bishop Chase, left for the territory of Michigan, with the intent of visiting his son, James, who had a farm in Texas township. ³

Upon arriving at James' farm, after a long trip of 300 miles, Bezaleel and Hezekiah were amazed by the fertile land. Bezaleel later returned to Steubenville, where he

² Ibíd., p. 106.
was to die on August 4, 1846. Hezekiah remained with his brother for two years, living in a log cabin. Besides helping James on the farm, Hezekiah set up his own law practice in nearby Bronson. On May 23, 1834, he was admitted to practice before the Bronson Circuit Court. In 1835, Wells moved to the township of Schoolcraft, where he was to hold many positions in the township and county governments; i.e., supervisor, township treasurer, and county judge. In April, 1835, Wells was elected as one of the delegates to the first Constitutional Convention of the state of Michigan.

The Convention convened in the territorial capital in Detroit on May 11, 1835. Hezekiah was the youngest member of the body which was composed of the ablest and most useful men in the Territory. H.G. Wells later said the following of the assembly:

"We were of the youngest members of the convention, elected, possibly, for the mere purpose of contrast, for in the assemblage were men with whitened locks and large experience in life; men of almost every avocation were there; (farmers, mechanics, millers, editors, clergymen, doctors, and lawyers). Such was the composition of the convention, the largest proportion of them eminently practical men; they were trying to work out the problem in a new country as pioneers, how to live."  

Wells served on various important committees of the Convention: the standing committee on miscellaneous affairs;

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committee on education; committee "on the mode and manner of amending the Constitution"; and the committee relating to the location of a seat of government. Although Hezekiah actively participated in the affairs of the committees, there is no record of his participation in the discussion of the Convention as a whole. On June 24, 1835, the Convention accepted the final draft of the first Constitution of the state of Michigan. In the voting on the separate resolutions of the Convention, Wells voted with the majority of all but 30 of the 105 roll calls.

The Constitution, like the Constitution of the United States, provided a framework for the machinery of government, and left the legislation to the legislature. The Constitution was laid before the people for ratification on October 5, 1835, and was overwhelmingly supported.

The Whig State Convention of 1837, which assembled at Ann Arbor on August 2, was not very representative, for little more than half of the counties of the State sent delegates to the Convention. In the voting for nominations for the new state's one member of Congress, H.G. Wells was victorious. Wells, who by this time was a brilliant young lawyer, although only twenty-five years old and a resident of the State for only four years, had made a great impression on many people beyond his immediate acquaintance with his profound capabilities. His

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Democratic opponent was also a younger member of the body which met to formulate the State Constitution; and did much towards the advancement of a sound system of education in Michigan. His name was Isaac E. Crary. In the election, out of 21,729 of the votes that were cast, Crary had received 11,430 and Wells 10,299, giving Crary a majority of 1,131, of which 821 had been contributed by the counties of Wayne and Monroe.  

The Whig Convention of 1838 was a more representative assemblage than that of the previous year. The delegates assembled at Ann Arbor on September 5, 1838. On the first roll call for the nomination of member of Congress, Hezekiah was again nominated to represent the Whig party, receiving 131 votes out of a total of 164. Isaac E. Crary was again nominated by the Democratic State Convention. The Whigs opened their violent attacks on Crary by declaring that he had proved himself "the pliant tool of power and the betrayer of his country's best interests," and was further characterized as "not possessed of the ability or honesty requisite to form an enlightened statesman or distinguished legislator."  

In the period prior to the Civil War the power of each political party found its source in the newspaper and the political speaker. These instruments were the means of keeping their supporters informed on all the pol-

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1 Hemans, Lawton, Life and Times of Stevens Thomson Mason, Lansing, Michigan Historical Commission, 1920, p. 301. 
2 Ibid., p. 449.
itical issues and topics of the day. The political speaker would address his followers in an off-hand speech and manner, which would fit the occasion. Since this was before the days of stenographic reporting, the full speech did not get into print, and the only way for the people to get it was to attend the political meeting, where it was delivered. Newspapers gave outlines of these speeches, and ringing editorials of the party issues, and were great aids to the party's cause; but the party "stump-speaker" was the direct and controlling force of the Democratic and Whig days before the Civil War.  

H.G.Wells, in a speech of September 14, 1838, failed to hold high the Whig banner, if we are able to accept the report given by the Democratic Kalamazoo Gazette. An observer of the failure in Kalamazoo gave the following interesting and colorful account of the event:

"There was a wonderful stir last eve in the streets of Kalamazoo....As for my own part, supposing that Webster or Clay, or some other wonderful man had arrived, who would deliver a speech on some momentous subject, I clapped on my box-coat and repaired to the place of rendezvous. I had remained but a short time before I learned that the meeting consisted principally of whigs and the subject for which they assembled was to appoint a town committee and hear the much talked of, and long promised, speech of Mr. Wells, which the whigs confidently believed would convert every democrat in Michigan, on the first perusal.

"I now prepared myself to hear the mighty

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1 Fuller, George, Historic Michigan, Dayton, National Historic Association, Inc., 1924, Volume I, p. 496.
rushing of a thinking, logical and radiocin-
ative mind -- deep, original, and intellect-
ual -- when every sentence would be an argu-
ment, and every argument would excite a feel-
ing corresponding to the thought .... The
orator rose and took his position .... I turn-
ed my ear for catching the first heaven-like
sound that should proceed from his lips, when
lo! -- it came!! -- 'mirable dictu' -- 'the
mountain labored and bro't forth a mouse!'

Wells' speech was a failure, and he closed with an apolo-
gy. The Whigs who were present at the meeting looked at
each other with amazement, as if to say, "is this the best
we've got?" The Democrats used this event as one of their
main attacks directed toward Wells. They wondered how a
man so bashful, or with so few ideas, could be expected
to advocate the interests of Michigan in Congress, where
there was so much talent.

Both candidates, as was mentioned before, were mem-
ers of the Convention that framed the Michigan Constitu-
tion. The degree to which the two participated in the
proceedings show a marked contrast. In the records of the
debates and proceedings of the Convention it appears that
Wells was a silent listener during the progress of the con-
vention -- there is not one single reference to Wells' ris-
ing to address the assembly. Wells' participation at the
Convention was confined to the proceedings of the various
committees of which he was a member. Crary, on the other

1 Kalamazoo Gazette, September 15, 1838.
2 Ibid., October 6, 1838.
hand, was one of the most active and influential of the younger members of the Convention. He was an able and forceful speaker, and on numerous occasions sought the floor to set forth his philosophy or to defend his principles. Thus, we may conclude that Crary was well qualified to expound his Party's principles, and would not hold back when the need arose; while Wells, from what we have seen from his performances at the Constitutional Convention and the Whig meeting in Kalamazoo, did not at this time possess the attributes necessary for an influential stump-speaker.

Hezekiah was a staunch supporter of Henry Clay, who was opposed to the Preemption Acts. The Democrats, whose candidate spoke out in favor of the Acts, wondered how it was possible to be a supporter of Henry Clay and a friend of the settler at the same time.

The outcome of the election seemed inevitable, but the numerical results came as a surprise. Wells received a majority of 253 in his own town and county, but was defeated in the state-wide elections. Although Isaac Crary was re-elected to Congress, his electoral majority was cut considerably by Wells. The majority was only 204, as against a majority of more than a thousand the year before. Wells' second defeat for Congressman did not end his political career, however, for he was chosen Presidential elector

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1 Dorr, op. cit., p. 23.
2 Kalamazoo Gazette, September 22, 1838.
from Michigan in 1840 and 1860, and later he was to be offered numerous political appointments on the national level.

In 1840, Hezekiah's active legal and political life was momentarily interrupted. The occasion for the interruption was his marriage to Achsa Strong, daughter of the Asa Strongs of Perch River, village, Jefferson County, New York. The ceremony was performed by the Reverend O.P. Hoyt, on September 9, 1840. Achsa's devotion to Hezekiah through life was of the highest order. There were no children in the family.

In 1845, Hezekiah again entered upon the political scene. This time he was elected to the post of county judge, a position which he would hold for four years. This is an opportune time to pause and look at the professional career of Wells, as a lawyer. In his practice in Schoolcraft, Wells acted as the agent of out of state real estate owners and money lenders, a position which no doubt assured him of a healthy income. He was in sympathy with the settlers in the county and acted as their friend and adviser, in preventing them from squandering the property they had obtained. He was an excellent office lawyer and no one, however poor, hesitated to call upon him for advice, and he would render his services without expecting to receive any financial payment in return. There is one particular case in which Wells rendered a service to the county: The

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1 Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, Vol. 8, p. 49.
Bronson Park claims of 1856. The case arose out of the claims made by the heirs of S. H. Richardson to the property of the park. Wells settled the matter on behalf of the county and obtained the release of the property. 1

Wells' views on law and the legal profession show the importance he placed upon his career:

"Law is based on what is true and right, the object of evidence is to find the truth, and without the legal profession, no other body of men, now or heretofore existing, would in all probability, have given to the world such a complete and systematic set of rules of evidence as now exist, by which truth is to be reached and determined." 2

In 1850 a body of men met in Lansing, the new State capitol, to adopt a new Constitution. Wells was elected as a delegate to this second Constitutional Convention, which convened on June 3, 1850. The Convention consisted of one hundred members, eighty Democrats and twenty Whigs. The Democrats seemingly dominated the Convention, and the several committees were all under the chairmanship of Democrats. Wells later remarked "that the Whigs brought more of brains into the convention than in the proportion of twenty to eighty." 3 The Convention adjourned on August 15, and in November the voters, by a huge

1 Durant, op. cit., p. 109.
majority, approved the new Constitution. An amendment submitted separately at the same time, which would have given Negroes the suffrage, was defeated by a vote of 32,000 to 12,000. The new constitution differed from that of 1835 in many respects, and was to remain the fundamental law of Michigan until January 1, 1909.

The first Republican national convention assembled at Philadelphia on June 17, 1856. The Michigan delegates to the convention included Zachariah Chandler of Detroit, who was named to the National Executive Committee, David S. Walbridge, congressman from Kalamazoo, and Hezekiah G. Wells. The presidential nomination went to the "Pathfinder", John C. Fremont, and the vice-presidential nomination fell to William L. Dayton of New Jersey. Among the men receiving votes for the vice-presidency was Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, who received 110 of the votes cast. The showing of Lincoln at the convention perhaps had something to do with his invitation to speak in Kalamazoo a month later.

A "Great Mass Convention of the Republican Young Men of Michigan" was planned to meet on August 27, 1856, at Kalamazoo. The meeting was called in the name of "free speech, free press, free soil, free men and FREMONT."

The chairman of the executive committee in charge of the political rally is the subject of this paper, H. G. Wells. Among the several speakers invited to the meeting was Abraham Lincoln, at the time generally unknown in Michigan, but known to those who were active in the affairs of the new Republican party, including Wells. Hezekiah extended the invitation to Lincoln, and after some delay, received the following reply:

Springfield, Ill. Aug. 21, 1856

Hon: H. G. Wells,
Dear Sir:

At last I am able to say, no accident preventing, I will be with you on the 27th. I suppose I can reach in time, leaving Chicago the same morning. I shall go to the Matteson House, Chicago, on the evening of the 26th.

Yours truly
A. Lincoln

Lincoln's speech, which was an attack against the extension of slavery, was a great success, and was accepted with much enthusiasm. Lincoln had spoken at two o'clock in the afternoon, and since the next train back to Chicago left Kalamazoo the next day, Lincoln stayed overnight in Kalamazoo. It is probable that he slept in the home of Wells that night. Wells' home was a comfortable residence across from Bronson Park, where Lincoln spoke; the site of the home is now occupied by the Civic Theatre. The following morning Lincoln probably spent some time visiting with local politicians.

1 Ibid., p. 14.
2 Ibid., p. 18.
3 Ibid., p. 216.
In the following year, 1857, Hezekiah was elected village president, a position he was to hold again in 1858, '64, and '65. 1 In 1861, Wells was elected by the state Legislature as a member of the state Board of Agriculture, and was later elected president of the Board by his associates.

The year 1861 marked the beginning of the event which was to shake the nation: the Civil War. The struggle had been evolving for several years, and came to its culmination on April 12, 1861, the day of the Confederate bombardment of the federal garrison of Fort Sumter. A plea for troops went out from President Lincoln to each loyal state, and the volunteers assembled into regiments at some prescribed rendezvous. In the fall of 1862, Kalamazoo was appointed as the site of assembly for the 25th regiment infantry. When the 25th regiment was ordered into rendezvous at Kalamazoo, Hezekiah G. Wells was placed in command of the camp. It was Wells' job to organize the regiment. Colonel Orlando H. Moore, then a captain in the U. S. army, was the officer who drilled and disciplined the men, and who took the field as their commander.

Before the 25th regiment left Kalamazoo for the front, a silk flag was presented to the unit by Wells, on behalf of the citizens of Kalamazoo. The inscription on the flag read: "This flag is given in faith that it will be carried where honor and duty lead." On September 29, 1862, the regiment

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1 Durant, op. cit., p. 226.
moved from Kalamazoo. The 25th distinguished itself during the war, and participated in General Sherman's famous march to the sea. Wells had shown, at the age of fifty, that he could be of service to his country in time of war, as well as peace.

President Lincoln, remembering H. G. Wells as one of his ardent supporters, appointed Wells a "Minister Resident to the Central American States." Wells, for reasons unknown, rejected the appointment, as he did with another, during President Johnson's administration, as consul to Manchester, England. The latter appointment would have assured Wells of a lucrative income, and since Wells was of English descent, it is difficult to understand why he rejected the position. Perhaps he felt that he could accomplish more if he stayed in his own country. Considering the income motive for accepting the consulship, Wells was not losing a great deal, for in 1871 he was listed among the "wealthy men of Kalamazoo county", having at his disposal $25,000 in real estate and $16,000 in personal property. Thus he probably felt that he should not accept the position. (The latter statements are merely conjecture on the part of the writer.)

On May 30, 1871, the Pioneer Society of Kalamazoo County was organized, and on June 5, Wells was elected a member of the historical committee. Wells was elected

1 Robertson, John, Michigan in the War, Lansing, W. S. George and Company, state printers, 1882, pp. 450-459.
2 Daily Telegraph, February 16, 1871.
as its president in 1880. Wells took an active part in the
many functions of the Pioneer Society. Hezekiah was well
known for his attractive powers as an historian and story
teller, and was called upon many times to depict the char-
acteristics of noted pioneers.  

In 1873 Wells was appointed by Governor John J. Bagley,
one of the eighteen commissioners, to prepare and report a
constitution for the State, to be voted on by the people.
Wells was elected temporary president of the Commission, and
on August 27th, presented the following speech:

"We are called here from among the people not as
representatives of a party, not as political parti-
sans, but it is expected of this assembled Commission
that it shall honestly and fairly submit such changes
in the constitutional law of Michigan, as the inter-
est of a great and growing people demand -- a people
who hold rank in material wealth and educational ad-
vancement second to no other state in the Union."

The new constitution which the commission had prepared was
put before the people, and it did not warrant their approval.
The Constitution of 1850 remained intact.

The most gratifying position Wells ever held in his
many years of public service came in June, 1874, when he was
appointed presiding judge of the Court of Commissioners of
Alabama Claims, by President Grant; the appointment was unan-
imously confirmed by the U. S. Senate. The "Alabama Claims"
case started from the fact that during the war between the
States certain warships were built in English ports for the:

2  Kalamazoo Gazette, September 5, 1873.
South. Despite repeated protests from the North, the Alabama, Florida, Shenandoah, and other ships were allowed to depart from England, and were later equipped with English weapons. The ships roamed the seas for three years, preying on Yankee ships. The United States leveled charges of "insincere neutrality" and "veiled hostility" against the British for giving assistance to the South. After the war was over the United States presented claims against England which were studied by an international tribunal at Geneva. The Geneva court awarded claims amounting to over $15,000,000 in gold to the United States. When the award was finally made, American firms and individuals who had suffered losses due to the warships, during the war, filed claims for compensation. These claims were studied and acted upon by the Court of Commissioners of Alabama Claims, of which Wells was presiding judge.

The Court convened and organized in the city of Washington on July 22, 1874, and was to exist, by act of Congress, for one year. On July 22, 1874, since a large portion of the business was still unaccomplished, the time of the duration of the Court was extended, in order for the Court to dispose of all of the claims which had been presented. The functions of the Court were continued until January 1, 1877, for a total

1 Ibid., March 31, 1947.
of two and one-half years. In this period of time the Court entered judgements in 2,068 cases, distributing the sum of $9,316,120.25. In his annual speeches of 1875 and 1876, President Grant complimented the Court for a job well done: "The Court of Commissioners of Alabama Claims has prosecuted its important duties very assiduously and very satisfactorily."

The Court of Commissioners was set up again in 1882, by President Arthur, and Wells was reappointed presiding judge. Judge Wells remained on the Court until ill health compelled him to retire in September, 1884. Wells had never held any office where he received a compensation adequate to the service rendered until he was appointed presiding judge of the Court. This was to him a very gratifying appointment, for it gave him the opportunity to "fully meet his ambitious desire to occupy some higher position than he had heretofore held as a public servant."

In September, 1884, Wells resigned his position as president of the Court of Commissioners of Alabama Claims, and returned from Washington to Kalamazoo in June of 1885. Wells had been troubled several years with fatty degeneration of the heart, which was later aggravated by rheumatism; it was his illness which forced him to resign from the Court. Wells suffered severely in his last year of life, growing feeble and feeble, losing flesh and strength. Death finally

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1 Ibid., p. 402.
2 Ibid., p. 342.
3 Telegraph, April 4, 1885.
came on the morning of April 4, 1885, at 11:15. A short time before he died he was conscious and talked with friends; and Wells, thoroughly aware of his condition peacefully said 'to a friend, "I only wait God's permission to go".  

Thus ended the life of Hezekiah G. Wells who, for over fifty years, since his residence in the state, had held some public position almost continuously. Wells' life was an active one, dedicated to bettering the conditions of those with whom he lived, by aiding and assisting in framing the Constitution of Michigan. Wells was also president of the state Agricultural College for a number of years, and did much to establish its reputation as a leading institution. Through the life of this devoted man, the community, the county, the state, the nation, in which he lived, were greatly enriched. Saint Luke's Parish, in Kalamazoo, of which Wells was a vestryman of long standing, put upon the church record the following just and eloquent tribute:  

IN MEMORIAM

The wardens and vestry of Saint Luke's Parish, with sorrow and a deep sense of personal loss, record the death of Hezekiah G. Wells, for many years a devoted member of the vestry of this parish. We desire to place upon its records this memorial of our appreciation of his lofty Christian character, his untiring efforts for the welfare of this parish, his championship of education in all its phases, and his rare ability, spent in the life-long service of the community, the State, and the nation. We congratulate the city upon the spectacle of a spotless and unselfish life fittingly concluded.

1 Telegraph, April 4, 1885.
2 Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, Vol. 8, p. 49.
3 As printed in the Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, Vol. 8, p. 171.
SOURCES

Primary Sources:

1. Kalamazoo Gazette:
   - September 15, 1838
   - September 22, 1838
   - October 6, 1838
   - September 5, 1873

2. Kalamazoo Telegraph:
   - February 15, 1871
   - April 4, 1885
   - April 6, 1885

3. Letter of Abraham Lincoln to H. G. Wells, as quoted in Thomas Starr's *Lincoln's Kalamazoo Address*.


Secondary Sources:


