Joseph Lane (1801-1881)

Joseph Lane was the first governor of Oregon Territory. A leading Democrat, he was a U.S. senator and candidate for vice president in 1860. Fiercely independent and ambitious for personal political power, Lane was a successful advocate of his constituents' interests and an outspoken and controversial defender of slavery.

Born near Asheville, North Carolina, on December 14, 1801, Lane left home at the age of fourteen. He settled in Darlington, Indiana, where he married Polly Hart, fathered ten children, farmed, and served in the state legislature. After several key victories as a brigadier general in the Mexican War, Lane was considered a hero and was rewarded by being named governor of the newly organized Oregon Territory.

Arriving in Oregon City on March 2, 1849, Lane made an impact on territorial politics during his brief tenure as governor. His blunt dealings with Native Americans won him support among his constituents, especially when he obtained the surrender of five Cayuse for the murder of Marcus Whitman and his family. The five men were subsequently tried and hanged by territorial officials. Referred to as General Lane due to his rank during the Mexican War, he also successfully negotiated with tribal leaders in the Rogue River area in 1850 and 1851.

In 1851, Lane won the first of four two-year terms as Oregon’s territorial delegate to Congress. That year, the territorial legislature named Lane County in his honor. As a delegate, he served his constituents well, securing federal funds for roads, mail service, and defense against Indians. He became a vital part of the Oregon Democratic machine, which dominated Oregon politics through the mid 1850s.

Sectional issues and especially slavery soon divided Oregon Democrats and voters in general. As a result of his Southern background, Lane was convinced of the slaveholders' right to bring slaves into any territory. He identified with President James Buchanan’s position favoring legalization of slavery in Kansas Territory, the most divisive issue of the mid 1850s.

When Oregon achieved statehood on February 14, 1859, Lane was elected to the U.S. Senate. Although his political influence remained strong, he alienated an increasing number of Oregonians as he continued to defend territorial slavery. When the national Democratic Party divided into northern and southern wings in 1860, the southern wing chose Lane to run as vice president with presidential nominee John Breckenridge, a Kentucky slaveholder.

During the campaign, the North received Lane coolly while the South embraced him as one of its own. With Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party the winners, the Breckenridge-Lane ticket placed second in Oregon behind Lincoln and ahead of the northern Democrats and their candidate, Stephen A. Douglas.

Upon the secession of the Lower South from the Union in early 1861, Lane rejected compromise and defended separation. Oregon Republicans in the legislature denied him re-election to the Senate. He completed his term defending secession and denying the Union's right to coerce the South. His son John’s decision to leave West Point and accept a commission in the Confederate army added to the senior Lane’s growing unpopularity.

Retired from Oregon politics, Lane lived for twenty years on his farm near Roseburg, where he died on April 19, 1881. His home, the Floed-Lane House, is now a Douglas County Historical Society museum.

Written by Fred Blue

Further Reading:

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