

Chapter 5

“An Ungovernable Mob”

The Exchange St. Depot

Preparations for an Event:

The early morning sunshine had melted the snow from the previous night. The temperature had risen to just above freezing. It looked like it would be an ideal winter day; at least as best as you can expect in February. There was only one problem with it. The sunshine and the melted snow brought about muddy roads. Some of them were impassable muddy roads. The “streets ... were as slushy and unclean as paved thoroughfares well can be.” Nevertheless, today would be an eventful day for the city. Activity began early in the morning. Flags began to rise on the flagpoles and in front of the buildings. As the morning progressed, other decorations appeared. Building fronts were now covered with “tri-colored drapery”. An array of flags, both large and small, were appearing in countless places all over the city, “until Buffalo had put on the most gala look that she had worn for many a month.” By late morning, people had begun to gather “more thickly than usual,” especially at the street corners. By early afternoon, the crowds rapidly increased. The city inhabitants were now stopping their work and the country folks were arriving in great numbers, coming in from the rest of the county. There was a holiday excitement in the air. Amongst the crowd there was a “prevailing anticipation of something memorable and important in occurrence.” Today, Saturday, February 16, 1861, the President-elect, Abraham Lincoln, was coming to town.

“When the looked for hour of the President’s coming had arrived, the crowd, the bustle, the excitement which all day had grown, was at a climax which we think it perfectly safe to say never has been equaled in Buffalo. Packed upon the walks, clustered upon the roofs, crowded at the windows ... heaped and overflowing everywhere within view of the route of the expected procession, such a swarming of humanity ... we never before saw in our Queen City. Within and around the depot on Exchange street the press was of course the greatest. There the crowd was absolutely fearful in its magnitude and in the excitement under which it swayed as under a tempest.”¹

The Arrival:

At precisely 4:30 PM, the cannon of Major Wiedrich’s Artillery Company on Michigan Street broadcast the arrival of the train. The wildest cheering greeted its appearance, “cheering that began with the multitude away down the track ... gathering volume as it rolled up to the Depot.”² The Depot was the Exchange Street Station. The original structure built in the late 1840’s was no more than a shed with one track. The 1861 building was the second one and the first built by the New York Central. Although much larger than the original, it was still a bit too cramped for the crowd of this day.

A Cleveland reporter on the train described the scene as they approached the city. “We began to see crowds of people standing near the railroad when the train was a mile out of Buffalo. As we advanced the crowds thickened and shouts from thousands of throats and the loud booming of cannon were heard. The crowd filled open freight cars on the track, stood in solid masses on car tops, filled windows and every conceivable standing place from which to see. In the neighborhood of the depot the throng was very dense, and within they were packed so closely they could only move in masses of hundreds.”³

Another reporter on the train told of the fears they had for their own protection. “As that place was neared fears began to be entertained as to the provision made for protecting the party from the rush of curious people that would probably take place on alighting. As the train entered the depot a single glance sufficed to show that those fears were well grounded. The preparations were wholly inadequate for the occasion. The mob swarmed over the cars, and were only kept out from them by the most strenuous exertions of the train officers and the President’s party themselves. The handful of military were hemmed in by the crowd, and rendered utterly powerless for good or evil.”⁴

The crowd inside the depot, estimated to be at least 10,000, struggled to get a better view of the rear car of the train, which contained the President-elect.⁵ When it came to a halt, “D” Company took a few minutes to open a passageway from the train to the depot main exit. Lincoln then appeared on the rear platform with Almon Clapp. Millard Fillmore, the former President, met him at the steps and “greeted him in a few words simply of congratulation upon the safety of his journey and the preservation of his health, in response to which Mr. Lincoln expressed his thanks. Attended then by Mr. Fillmore, Mr. Clapp, and Mr. Bemis, mayor pro tem, the President proceeded to the carriage through the line opened by the military.”⁶

The Buffalo Morning Express described with shame and regrets the scene that took place next. “The crowd, in its eagerness to get nearer to the distinguished visitor ... became an ungovernable mob, making an irresistible rush towards him which swept the soldiers from their lines, and threw everything into the wildest confusion...” The Buffalo Daily Courier described the scene as such: “The instant Mr. Lincoln got fairly out into the depot, and before more than half of his attendants had made good their exit, the vast multitude on both sides made a blind, tremendous rush, after him, for the door. The passage way closed up instantly and the two files

of soldiers were broken into about as many pieces as there were men in them.”⁷ The crowd was now out of control as they were trying to get a better view of the President-elect. The soldiers were overrun by the mob and in disarray. Having lost control of their guns, the bayonets were pointing out in a horizontal position. One individual was pushed against the point of a bayonet but amazingly, was not seriously injured. Lincoln “did not escape uncrushed, but he sustained no injuries.”⁸ Another account said that “the tall form of Mr. Lincoln and the venerable head of Mr. Fillmore were seen to sway to one side and the other as the crowd surged in upon them on either side, and the people acted more like a lot of savages than anything else.”⁹ Robert Lincoln and Neil Dennison, the son of the Ohio governor, were pushed around so much that they barely escaped falling and being trampled. A Lieutenant and a few of his soldiers were able to regain control of themselves, fought back to where Lincoln & Fillmore were located, surrounded them and kept the crowd away. Finally, a passage way was opened for the President to safely reach his carriage. However, most of the committee members and news reporters were swallowed up by the mob. “The military, when asked to clear a passage, pitifully answered that ‘we can do nothing; if you can make your way through, you will do better than we can.’”¹⁰

It was miraculous there were no serious injuries that occurred throughout these several minutes. Major David Hunter, from the President’s party, suffered the most severe injury, a sprained shoulder after being pushed against a wall. One person in the crowd, an older man from Lancaster named Bruce, suffered fractured ribs after being jammed in the doorway. He was taken to the Wadsworth House where medical attention was given to him.¹¹ “A crowd, even when thoroughly good humored, as was this, is dangerously unwieldy; when it has once wedged itself into a space too small for it, it can neither control itself nor be controlled by force.”¹²

Who was in charge here? The militia tried to protect the visitors but there were just so few of them. Why were there not more brought in for protection? But the primary question that needed to be answered was: Why was the crowd allowed into the depot in the first place? If the depot had been empty, the arrival could have been pulled off without an incident. One of the Buffalo newspapers suggests that the depot had, in fact, been closed. “An effort, quite inefficient, had been made to keep the depot closed until the arrival of the train. The doors were barred, but the train entrance being wide open, everyone went in who pleased.”¹³ The doors were apparently barricaded, but that didn’t stop the crowd. They just walked around the building to the tracks and went in that way. This was a major mistake allowed by the city planners. It was one that could easily have resulted in a loss of life, possibly even of Lincoln himself. It was not a good start for the positive national image of the city.

The Parade:

Lincoln entered his carriage, drawn by four horses. Sitting with him were Fillmore, Asaph Bemis, and Almon Clapp. The rest of the entourage was not so fortunate. “The line of carriages was broken up. Members of the president’s party after fighting their way through the crowd wandered about among the carriages, finding most of them occupied in the most cosy manner by Buffalo reception Committees, and some of the president’s suite walked to the hotel.”¹⁴. Another newspaper reported that “the carriages which had been provided for the suite were filled with Buffalo officials and citizens, leaving the ‘guests of the city’ to fight their way a-foot, or enter carriages at least a quarter of a mile from the party to which they belonged.”¹⁵ The travelers, having barely survived the mob scene inside the depot, finally made it to daylight only to find disorganization among the carriages. The Buffalo Reception Committee of 34 members apparently forgot their role of host. Many of the guests ended up walking to the hotel. Yet another hit to the city’s positive image.

It took a few minutes but the procession was finally ready to get under way. Marshal Gustavus Scroggs and his assistants took the lead. The Union Cornet Band and Major Weidrich's Light Artillery followed them. The open carriage containing Lincoln was next. Behind them were several carriages carrying the President's party, members of the press and various committee members.¹⁶ Mrs. Lincoln and her two young sons were not involved in the depot madness or the parade. They had quickly exited the train and were immediately taken to the hotel by way of Carroll Street.

The cheering and excitement of Buffalo's citizens, along with thousands of waving handkerchiefs, greeted Lincoln as the Parade traveled up Exchange Street and then on Main Street to the American Hotel. "The vast multitude of people ... thronged the route of the procession, filling the streets, crowding the roofs and swarming about every window of the buildings on either side for the half mile distance."¹⁷ The carriage stopped in front of the American. The military formed two lines for Mr. Lincoln to walk through into the hotel.

