



"Knowing our past. guides our future."

Gideon Welles-Gastonbury's Native Son

by Gary E. Wait

Mr. Wait is a leading expert on the life and times of Gideon Welles.

During the dark days of the Civil War, when the Union army was suffering a series of discouraging reverses, and it had begun to appear that the Lincoln Administration might go down to defeat in the forthcoming national election, two prominent national officials sat discussing the country's future on the porch of the old Welles mansion in Glastonbury. One, the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, had been born in the house some sixty years before, and had come "home" to attend the funeral of his nephew, a casualty of the war.

With him was Admiral David G. Farragut, hero of the Battle of New Orleans, whom Welles had placed in charge of the expedition. Welles' faith in Farragut had been justified--and in the aftermath of family tragedy, they turned once again to the affairs of state, discussing on the porch of Welles' ancestral home the strategy by which the Navy hoped to wrest another key position from the rebellious South. In the days that followed, the successful operation at Mobile Bay under Farragut's command would vindicate their plans.

Born in the old Welles mansion in Glastonbury on July 1, 1802, Gideon Welles was a direct descendant of colonial governor Thomas Welles. A graduate of the Cheshire Academy, Welles embarked on the career of political journalism, under the auspices of John M. Niles (later U. S. Senator and Postmaster General), then editor of the Hartford Times, the state's leading Democratic newspaper.

Instrumental in promoting democratic reforms and the presidential campaign of Andrew Jackson in 1828, Welles also served several terms as his town's representative in the Legislature. But it was as a political leader and journalist that he achieved his greatest successes in the pre-Civil War period, becoming one of his party's most effective advocates.

Convinced of the injustice of human slavery, and adamantly opposed to its spread into the new territory in the West, Welles broke with the Democratic Party in the mid-1850s, in the wake of the Kansas Nebraska Act. With such rising young politicians as John Hooker and Joseph R. Hawley, Welles organized what would become the Republican Party in Connecticut, ran as its first candidate for governor in 1856, and oversaw the establishment of a new newspaper, the Hartford Evening Press, to promote the cause.

In 1860, Welles headed the campaign in Connecticut which helped propel Abraham Lincoln into the White House. Appointed to head the Navy Department in the new administration, he accomplished the herculean task of creating a functioning naval force from virtually nothing, building up a successful blockade of southern ports, and achieving a stunning series of naval victories that did much to hasten the end of the war.

In addition, Welles won the personal confidence and friendship of the President. It was to Welles and Secretary of State Seward that Lincoln first broached the idea of an Emancipation Proclamation--an idea to which Welles lent hearty support. And it was to Welles and his wife Mary Jane that the Lincolns turned for comfort after the death of their little son Willie in 1862. Likewise, it was for Mrs. Welles that Mary Lincoln sent to keep watch with her through the long night of her husband's assassination, while Gideon Welles kept vigil at the bedside of his dying chief.

Throughout his Cabinet service, Welles kept a detailed journal of persons and events. In its published form it is one of the great American diaries and an essential source for Civil War scholars. One of the first to recognize and appreciate Lincoln's greatness, Welles' post-war writings afford the first studied assessment of Lincoln as the true leader of his administration and one of America's greatest statesmen.

Welles as a Journalist

Journalism could be a dangerous profession in 19th century America. In the decades preceding the Civil War, most

American newspapers existed not so much to report events as to promote causes. Party politics, religion, temperance reform, abolitionism, and a host of pseudo-scientific fads and fancies--all had journals to promote their causes.

The Hartford Times was no exception. Founded in 1817 by John M. Niles to promote the cause of Jeffersonian democracy, the paper struggled to maintain a tenuous existence in federalist Hartford. In 1825, however, it began to accept literary sketches and political editorials from a young literary protégé of Lydia Sigourney, Gideon Welles.

As Niles became more actively involved in Democratic politics, Welles assumed editorial control of the paper, vigorously attacking what he saw as the entrenched self-interest of the Connecticut establishment and promoting Democratic principles and the presidential aspirations of popular hero Andrew Jackson. Soon, under Welles' direction, the struggling Times became a force to be reckoned with in state politics.

But its success also attracted powerful and able enemies, in an age when editorial invective was the norm, rather than the exception. Wielding an often acid pen in behalf of Jacksonian politics, Welles soon ran afoul of another rising journalist (ironically another protégé of Mrs. Sigourney). John Greenleaf Whittier had come to Hartford in 1831 to take charge of the New England Weekly Review, a rival paper promoting the political aspirations of Henry Clay. Soon the rival editors, both personally shy, were hurling journalistic darts at each other, Whittier going so far as to accuse his rival of being a mere "jobber for office hunters--the fool and pimp of [the Jacksonian Party]" and guilty of "ineffable, inimitable meanness..." Welles' attacks on Whittier were hardly kinder, and the two men might well have come to blows had not both realized that this was merely part and parcel of the journalistic practice of the day.

Under Welles' spirited leadership, the Times grew from a struggling weekly to the best daily newspaper in the state. In the 1850s, however, as Welles was drawn increasingly into the antislavery camp, he would break with the Times, when his Free Soil editorials were no longer welcomed by its proprietors.

Therefore, with Joseph R. Hawley, Niles, and others, in early 1856, Welles founded a new daily, the Hartford Evening Press, to promote Free Soil principles and the infant Republican Party. Under his able management, the Press soon became the most vigorous Republican paper in the state and a journal of national significance. From its editorial office, Welles assumed the leadership in Connecticut of the Republican presidential campaigns of 1856 and 1860. In recognition of his role in the successful campaign of 1860, Abraham Lincoln chose Gideon Welles to be the only New England appointment to his Cabinet.

Integrity in Politics

Integrity and service were the watchwords by which Gideon Welles guided his political life. Ironically, both would cost him the rapid advancement that came so readily to some of his more supple and often more cynical rivals who put preferment ahead of principle. Yet, ultimately, Welles' integrity and his willingness to serve diligently in a host of humble though honorable posts proved an admirable apprenticeship for the Cabinet office which marked the apex of his career.

American politics, like American society in the pre-Civil War era, was rife with fads and manias which, however paranoid or bizarre, are not without their parallels today. With some, Welles allowed himself a curious flirtation. For instance, in the 1840s, he had the bumps on his head "read," and in 1854, in the wake of his daughter Anna Jane's death, he reluctantly attended a series of séances promoted by his Times associate, Frank Burr. These were personal matters, however, soon dismissed by this staunch New England Episcopalian. But he had no patience with bigotry, especially when it erupted in a series of one-issue political parties, like the Anti-Masons of the 1830s and the Know-Nothings (American Party) of the 1850s.

The former, arising out of the abduction and alleged murder of William Morgan for revealing Masonic secrets, professed to see in Freemasonry a conspiracy to control or subvert American democracy. Determined to outlaw the fraternity, Anti-Masonic partisans, with no other political or social agenda, launched a Presidential candidate in the campaign of 1832.

Himself a Freemason--though hardly an active one--Welles saw through the paranoid conspiracy theory and effectively opposed its bigoted objectives. And, while he never squarely confronted the inconsistency of secret fraternities with the principles of Jeffersonian democracy, Welles had no respect for the opportunism of aspiring politicians like William Henry Seward, who became Governor of New York by cynically allying himself with this mania in which he held no personal belief.

Likewise, with the extension of the franchise in the 1830s and 1840s to the humbler classes of voters which included many recent immigrants (mostly Roman Catholics), the "old order" began to fear for their political and economic supremacy. Blending their fear of the new electorate with their anxiety that recent immigrants, unused to thinking for themselves, would become pawns in a supposed Catholic conspiracy to overthrow democratic society, they organized a political party opposed to Catholicism as well as to suffrage and public office for recent immigrants.

By the mid-1850s, with the traditional parties fragmenting over the slavery issue, the American Party (called Know-Nothings because they disclaimed knowledge of their own objectives) held the balance of power in many a New

England political contest. By trafficking in bigotry, aspiring politicians like Massachusetts' Nathan P. Banks and Henry Wilson would propel themselves into national office.

While himself momentarily out of office, and thanks to his cautious support of the Free-Soil (anti-slavery) wing of the Democratic Party without a constituency in Connecticut in the early 1850s, Welles might easily have used anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiment to reestablish a political base in his home state. Instead, he courageously disavowed and ardently opposed any connection with the Know-Nothings, and thereby sacrificed his bid for Governor of Connecticut to a series of Know-Nothing rivals.

Reluctant Abolitionist

While always morally opposed to human slavery, Gideon Welles was slow to espouse the cause of abolition. Committed to the Jeffersonian ideal of local control of its own affairs and institutions, Welles, at the outset of his political career in the 1820s, accepted as a political and social "given" the principles of the Missouri Compromise, which acknowledged the legitimacy of the "peculiar institution" within the deep South, but in principle prevented its expansion into the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase.

Secure in this adjustment of a potentially volatile issue, Welles, early in his career, also applied the Jeffersonian principle of local control to such matters as Prudence Crandall's recruitment of African-American young ladies for her school in Canterbury, by defending the town's objection to these "imported" misses-of-color from beyond the town's borders--an objection the townsfolk would probably not have made had the "imports" been white. For Welles, however, the issue was no bigoted objection to the education of Black youth, but the primacy of his Jeffersonian politics over his humanitarian principles.

The annexation of Texas in 1845 and the addition of the lands extorted from Mexico in 1848, however, resulted in an aggressive southern push to extend slavery into the new territories. This forced Welles to reexamine his position at a time when he was himself a federal officeholder, serving as a bureau chief during the Mexican War.

Operating quietly through his brother Thaddeus, a power in Glastonbury politics, Welles threw his support behind his old friend Martin Van Buren, who was attempting to recapture the Presidency by heading the Free Soil element of the Democratic Party in the election of 1848. In the Whig landslide, Van Buren was resoundingly defeated, and Welles lost his place in the federal bureaucracy. But his two years' residence in Washington, an essentially southern city, had, for the first time, brought him face to face with the social iniquities of slavery. While still not fully convinced of racial equality, Welles had purchased the freedom of the Black servants he employed in his household and had become personally interested in their welfare. This direct contact with people of color would start Welles on a train of thought which would eventually draw him into the infant Republican Party, earn him a Cabinet post in the Lincoln administration, and place him foremost among those to whom Lincoln would broach the idea of emancipation by executive decree.

Once again, his Cabinet service brought Welles into direct contact with African-Americans--their hopes and aspirations, and the political and social wrongs to which they were subject. Among those he employed in his household was a young freedman named Henry Green. Green must have made a very favorable impression on the cautious Connecticut Yankee, for at the end of his Cabinet service in 1869, Welles brought Green to Hartford with him and employed him in his household until his death in 1878. Green continued in the family's service until his own death in 1911.

Ironically, Gideon Welles, always cautious in his approach to social and political equality, would not make his final public statement on the subject until more than thirty years after his death. On the death of Henry Green in 1911, it was disclosed that Welles had provided for his servant's burial beside his employer in Hartford's fashionable Cedar Hill Cemetery--the first Black person to be interred there, a former slave who had won his employer's respect, and very definitely an "import."

Secretary of the Navy

Opinions about Gideon Welles' effectiveness as head of the Navy Department differed widely at the outset of the Civil War. Unfamiliar with his excellent record as naval bureau chief during the Mexican War and his administrative ability, Congressman John Conness quipped sarcastically that an old ship's figurehead dressed in a wig and beard would serve as well. Moreover, Welles soon earned the enmity of Vice President Hamlin and Senator John P. Hale by stubbornly refusing to purchase inferior naval vessels from their venal New England cronies.

The new Secretary faced a daunting task. Committed by a government decision to blockade southern ports, Welles had over a thousand miles of coast to patrol with fewer than a dozen first-class ships. Also, many of the senior officers who remained loyal to the Union were too old or inexperienced for sea duty.

Together with Assistant Secretary Gustavus V. Fox and Chief Clerk William Faxon, his hand-picked associates, Welles thoroughly reorganized the Navy, promoting able junior officers and retiring the superannuated. Merchant vessels were purchased and refitted for wartime service, and new ships were acquired as rapidly as northern shipyards

could build them. In an astonishingly short time, Welles assembled an effective fighting force that achieved the first significant Union victories, which did much to bolster northern confidence in the wake of Bull Run. As the Washington Star observed, "So effective a naval force was never improvised by any government with so small a means at hand. Nine-tenths of the growling against the Secretary...comes originally from parties...disappointed on finding Secretary Welles not to be easily swindled [by] the [purchase] or charter of unfit vessels."

Union naval supremacy did not go uncontested, but as a result of the Secretary's foresight, the Navy was prepared to meet such challenges as the Confederate Virginia (Merrimac). Its defeat by Ericsson's Monitor proved that the Navy's so-called "Rip Van Winkle" had not been caught napping and had helped revolutionize naval warfare.

Steadily, patiently, without panic or fanfare, the Navy under Welles closed port after port in the south. A shrewd judge of personnel, Welles' courageous promotions of such capable officers as Andrew Hull Foote and David G. Farragut, with small regard to seniority or patronage, did much to advance the Union cause. Foote's support of General U. S. Grant's successful campaign against Forts Henry and Donaldson on the western rivers helped propel the failed West-Pointer into command of the entire Union Army. Similarly, Farragut proved his mettle by taking New Orleans without the aid of the army and later by achieving the naval victory at Mobile.

Quietly pursuing his responsibilities, Welles earned first the respect and then the friendship of his chief. "I am always happy to see Mr. Welles," Lincoln remarked, "for he always brings me good news." There were, of course, reverses like DuPont's failure to take Sumter, but these were exceptions in a steady record of achievement. As the number of naval victories grew, so did respect and praise for "Father Noah" as the President affectionately called his naval secretary.

Within the Lincoln administration, Assistant Secretary of War Charles A. Dana described Welles as "an excellent Secretary. He was a man of no decorations; there was no noise in the streets when he went along; but he understood his duty, and he did it efficiently, continually and unwaveringly." Treasury officer Maunsell B. Field, like Welles an acute observer of personalities, summed up his colleague's accomplishments thus "I became convinced that he was one of the best of Mr. Lincoln's immediate advisors. His patriarchal looks, his immense wig, his flowing beard...created an altogether false impression of him in the public mind... I always found him, perhaps to a greater degree than any of his associates, well up on the details of [his] Department. His personal management of its affairs was intelligent, thorough, and efficient. The country has never done him anything like justice."

The Two Marys

I went to the house...where the President lay...and I could see that there was no hope for him...I sat a few moments [with Mrs. Lincoln]... and was asked to get into the President's carriage...and go for Mrs. Sec. Welles. So wrote Benjamin Brown French of the tragic night of April 14, 1865, when President Abraham Lincoln lay dying of an assassin's bullet. French was Commissioner of Public Buildings. Like Gideon Welles, he kept a detailed diary which became a significant source of historical information.

Though herself seriously ill, Mary Jane Welles rose from her sickbed and hastened to Peterson House to comfort and support her friend Mary Lincoln through the long night watch--the only Cabinet lady to do so. And in the bitter days that followed, it was to the Welleses that the grieving widow turned repeatedly for support and for assistance with the many practical arrangements attendant upon a martyr's funeral and the transfer of government to a new President.

But this was by no means the first time that Mrs. Lincoln had turned to Mary Jane Welles for support in the face of tragedy. During the winter of 1862, the Lincolns' two youngest sons, Willie and Tad, contracted one of the numerous fevers that plagued the Washington climate. Beset by the host of responsibilities attendant upon her role as First Lady, Mary Lincoln had turned for help to the one Cabinet wife who had become her friend. Mrs. Welles had actually moved into the White House to assist the distraught mother in caring for her dangerously ill sons.

Willie died, and Mrs. Welles remained with her friend until Tad was out of danger and his mother could once again cope on her own. Later that same year the Welleses, too, would lose a young son to the unhealthy Washington climate.

Together the two Marys visited the military hospitals in and about the Capital, bringing comfort to other mothers' sons who had fallen in battle: distributing gifts, and writing letters home for soldiers too weak to write for themselves. As calm and stable as the President's wife was volatile and impulsive, and infinitely patient, Mrs. Welles was the ideal companion for the First Lady, who rubbed so many people the wrong way.

Both, in their way, were passionately devoted to their husbands and to their husbands' careers--and each brought to her role those qualities her husband most needed for success. A gracious hostess herself, and adept at using her social skills to support her husband's position as a ranking member of the administration, Mary Jane Welles never set herself up as a rival to the First Lady, but succeeded, as few were able to do, in making Mrs. Lincoln her friend.

No assessment of her husband's career would be complete without an understanding of the quiet but competent role Mary Jane Welles played in his rise to national office, and in his success in keeping it.

The Lincoln Legacy

Of the original members of Lincoln's Cabinet, Gideon Welles was probably the only one who did not believe that he, himself, should have been President instead. Seward, Chase, Bates, and Cameron had all been contenders for the Republican nomination, and Smith and Blair were plausible "dark horse" candidates. Any one of them could probably have been elected.

In the early days of the war, Seward, assuming that he was the real power behind an inept President, might well have shipwrecked the administration and the Union, had not the President, ably supported by his Secretary of the Navy, quietly but firmly asserted his own leadership. Four years later, Chase would mount a serious but unsuccessful effort to displace his chief, quashed in part by Welles' adept manipulation of the of the political machine.

In the decades following the Civil War, many of the wartime leaders published articles or memoirs each detailing his role--real or imagined--in saving the Union. In 1870, New York journalist Thurlow Weed published a chapter of his memoirs in *The Galaxy*, a monthly magazine, in which he claimed that, acting through Seward, he was the directing force in the early days of the Lincoln administration. His article also disparaged Welles, whom he had sought unsuccessfully to keep out of the Cabinet.

Stung by Weed's distorted and self-serving claims and by his unfair criticism of the Navy, which had early suffered as the result of Seward's meddling, Welles penned a reply that was published in the July issue of the magazine. Encouraged by its favorable reception, Welles began editing his wartime diaries with an eye to writing his own insider's history of the Lincoln administration. In a *Galaxy* article drawing on his diary and on the recollections of Bates and Blair, Welles related the behind-the-scenes maneuvering by which Seward had effectively scuttled the Sumter relief expedition.

When Seward died in 1872, wartime ambassador to Great Britain, Charles Francis Adams, in his eulogy of his former chief, again advanced the claim that Seward had been the directing power in the new administration. The three surviving members of the original Cabinet (Chase, Blair, and Welles) agreed that Welles should draft a rebuttal. The resulting articles formed the basis for Lincoln and Seward, published in 1873, in which Welles described Lincoln's preeminent role as statesman and leader.

Welles' additional essays, information he furnished to Charles Boynton for an official history of the Navy during the Civil War, and material that Welles' heirs provided to Nicolay and Hay, Lincoln's personal secretaries, for their monumental study of Lincoln's life, did much to dispel the myth of Seward's preeminence and establish Lincoln's.

During the last years of his life, Welles repeatedly revised his wartime diaries, probably with a view to their eventual publication. But his death in 1878 prevented their appearance during his lifetime. The two published editions (1911 Morse, and 1960 Beale), while a key resource for students of the Civil War, are a nightmare of inaccuracy for scholars attempting to discover what Welles originally wrote, what he revised from a later perspective, and what are simply mis-transcriptions and careless editing. Nevertheless, taken together, Welles' essays and diaries present the first and among the most significant arguments for acknowledging Lincoln's greatness as statesmen and savior of the nation.

Welles and Lincoln

"If I had a vote to give, it would be for Lincoln." So wrote Gideon Welles in a recently discovered letter, now in the author's collection. Commenting on the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, it is probably Welles' earliest recorded endorsement of the rising Illinois politician in whose Cabinet he would begin serving three years later. Although their public careers began at opposite ends of the political spectrum, starting in 1858, Welles and Lincoln became first cautious and then enthusiastic allies in their efforts to prevent the spread of slavery.

In the 1820s, Clay-Republican Lincoln and Jackson-Democrat Welles were political opposites. Lincoln, the son of a roving frontiersman who kept moving his family west, had failed twice at business before becoming a modestly successful frontier lawyer. In contrast, Welles, the scion of a proud Connecticut family and son of a well-established merchant-trader, was educated at Cheshire Academy in Connecticut and for a year at Alden Partridge's military college in Vermont. As shy of public debate as Lincoln was gregarious, Welles had abandoned the legal profession before admission to the bar to help manage his family's business and begin a career in political journalism. Early in their careers, it is hard to imagine two public men more unlike in temperament, philosophy, and politics--or more unknown to the public at large.

But there were also similarities that inexorably drew them into a common orbit. Both had ambition. Lincoln had served one undistinguished term in the U. S. House of Representatives, and Welles, never elected to federal office, had served as a naval bureau chief during the Mexican War. For years both languished in the backwaters of national politics. Because of their innate social conservatism and respect for the Constitution, neither considered himself an

abolitionist despite their mutual abhorrence of slavery,

As their personal acquaintance with the evils of slavery increased, however, so did their hatred of the “peculiar institution” and their determination to resist its spread. Thus in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the resulting “settlers’ war” for control of Kansas, Lincoln and Welles were on common ground. Both made sacrifices for their antislavery principles. Lincoln lost the Illinois senatorial contest in 1858, but his public exposure of the hypocrisy of Douglas and Buchanan won him the respect of free-soil Democrats like Welles. Welles’ opposition to the spread of slavery lost him his editorial position on the Hartford Times, but it gained him a national audience in Bryant’s New York Post and other influential newspapers. So the two men came together in the forefront of a new political synthesis and, in 1861, at the head of the national government.

In the troubled war years, Abraham Lincoln and Gideon Welles would not always agree. But integrity bred respect, and friendship soon followed. As the War for the Union became, as well, a war for emancipation, Welles, with Seward, would be the first of his advisors to whom the President would broach his plan for emancipation by presidential proclamation. And it was to Gideon and Mary Jane Welles that the Lincolns would turn in times of tragedy.

That now seems inevitable. Beginning as small-town politicians, each had grown through a struggle with ideas and events, and through a long and often-frustrating apprenticeship, to become a leader with the insight and patience necessary to help guide the nation through its darkest hour. Writing in 1851, Welles had characterized statesmen as those whose “great minds distinguished themselves on great occasions”--and in Abraham Lincoln and Gideon Welles they did.