

REVIVING THE DEMOCRACY:
WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN AND HIS CRUSADE TO SAVE THE DEMOCRATIC
PARTY

by

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University of Nebraska, 2007

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William Jennings Bryan believed that political history consisted of a constant battle between an elitist minority and the people. This elitist minority, known by many different names, ruled through coercion and fear. Bryan concluded that the only government that could protect the people was one in which the majority ruled. If the majority erred in its decisions, they could correct their errors, but when the elitist ruled oppressive decisions could not be reversed. In the nineteenth century the ability of capitalists to control economics and politics undermined American freedom. Capitalists used their wealth to control political parties and governments while exploiting the working class. Desperate farmers and laborers organized to fight the growing concentration of wealth and power.

Since the elitist minority had enormous time and money, the people must organize to fight oppression. People must remain politically active and informed. Bryan believed the Republican Party had sold out to big business so the Democratic Party was the only

party that could protect the people. From 1894 to 1912 he campaigned to make the Democratic Party serve the people's interest.

Bryan wanted to rescue the Democratic Party from capitalists and Bourbon Democrats who maintained a conservative, laissez-faire philosophy. He considered this a religious calling. Bryan developed a national system in which he maintained constant communication with reform-minded Democrats. He accomplished this through his constant lecture tours, speeches, correspondence, and journalistic activities.

Bryan was the dominant voice in shaping Democratic Party Platforms in 1896, 1900, and 1912. In 1904 and 1908 he made compromises with conservatives concerning the platform, but remained an essential influence. In 1912, he could not determine the presidential nominee, but he could prevent an aspirant from obtaining the nomination.

His effect on the Democratic Party was to change it from a conservative, junior-Republican Party to a liberal alternative to elitist control. His efforts came from neither accident nor demagoguery, but rather from a distinct vision.

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INTRODUCTION

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries William Jennings Bryan served as the catalyst for changes in the Democratic Party which brought it out of its laissez-faire philosophy to a safety-net philosophy. Bryan was not the lone Democrat to advocate government activity in the economic sphere, but his three unsuccessful presidential campaigns and his influence in the Democratic conventions from 1896 to 1912 provided a mainstream sounding board for new ideas that seemed radical to many people at the time. Many of Bryan's proposals would become part of mid-twentieth century mainstream thinking within the Democratic Party.

Bryan's reputation suffered from early biographies that were either too friendly or too antagonistic. In *The Peerless Leader* Paxton Hibben, while giving occasional credit to Bryan's efforts, portrayed him as a moron who brilliantly used people. Richard Hofstadter echoed Hibben's portrayal of an ignoramus who jumped onto the silver bandwagon in the 1890s for its political value. Both men pictured Bryan as a simpleton who somehow stumbled onto a good thing, free-silver, tried to exploit it but failed. J. R. Hollingsworth in his *The Whirligig of Politics* condemns Bryan for his inability to be an effective opposition leader.¹

In his massive three volume biography, Paolo Coletta debunked the free-silver as expedient issue argument by showing Bryan's early advocacy of bimetallism. Of all the Bryan biographers Coletta possessed the greatest access to primary sources. Coletta

¹ Paxton Hibben, *Peerless Leader: William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1929); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Random House, 1955); J. Rogers Hollingsworth, *The Whirligig of Politics: The Democracy of Cleveland and Bryan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

acknowledges Bryan's fidelity to his beliefs even in the midst of failure. Coletta attributes Bryan's failures to a lack of realism. The Coletta version shows Bryan as a man who willingly risked unpopularity yet had an instinct for seeing what reforms best aided the common man.²

Others before me have argued positions similar to mine, but have concentrated on different issues. In *The Trumpet Soundeth* Paul Glad placed Bryan in context of national trends. Glad sees Bryan as developing all his political opinions through the lens of his Evangelical Christian beliefs. To Glad, Bryan tried to base the Democratic Party on an underlying imperative of love. Glad's biography covers the years 1896 to 1912.³

David Sarasohn in *The Party of Reform* contends that the change in Democratic Party philosophy resulted from the party actively seeking to transform itself, but he deals with the party itself. He contends that previous historians have treated the Democrats as "objects" of reform rather than as active agents.⁴

Louis Koenig credits Bryan with being the founder of modern liberalism. He argues that Bryan placed principle over political victory, but also contends that Bryan searched out issues for campaigns rather than having a guiding principle. For example he refers to Bryan's visit to Vera Cruz as a deliberate attempt to transform his immature image. Koenig rejects the old image of Bryan as a simpleton. Koenig overstates the connection with modern liberalism somewhat in my mind. Bryan should not be

² Paolo E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan: I: Political Evangelist, 1860-1908* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964; *William Jennings Bryan: II: Progressive Politician and Moral Statesman, 1909-1915* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969).

³ Paul W. Glad, *The Trumpet Soundeth: William Jennings Bryan and his Democracy, 1896-1912* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966).

⁴ David Sarasohn, *The Party of Reform: Democrats in the Progressive Era* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1989).

considered the willing founder of modern liberalism because he viewed a life tenure civil service as the means for a new aristocracy to deprive the people of their rights.⁵

In *The Righteous Cause*, Robert Cherny credits Bryan with accidentally saving the Democratic Party. Cherny credits Bryan with laying the foundation for the modern Democratic Party but does not go as far as Louis Koenig in this regards. Cherny regards Bryan as shallow man intellectually who tended to evaluate problems intuitively rather than intellectually. Cherny questions if this attribute would have persisted had Bryan remained in Congress where he would have continued his work in a more intellectually challenging environment. I disagree with Cherny's terminology but not necessarily his interpretation of Bryan's intellect. I view Bryan as intellectually-narrow rather than shallow.⁶

In *A Godly Hero*, a book released after I began this work and which I did not have a chance to read until early 2007, Michael Kazin explains Bryan as a man trying to be the voice of the people against the organized wealth of corporate America. Kazin views Bryan as carrying the vestiges of rural Protestantism into his progressive ideals which reached fruition under Franklin D. Roosevelt.⁷

My views are similar to those of Glad, Kazin, and Koenig. Bryan viewed himself as something of a Moses preparing the way for future progressives. He held to principles first and preferred defeat to fraudulent victory. Bryan, as evidenced by an early experience after a Chadron, Nebraska, speech, had an intense fear of becoming a

⁵ Louis W. Koenig, *Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: G.P. Putnam's and Sons, 1971).

⁶ Robert A. Cherny, *A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1985).

⁷ Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

political demagogue. He viewed American politics as a continuing battle between the people and the “aristocracy.” He believed the aristocracy would continually rise phoenix-like under different guises to usurp power from the people. Aristocracy was his term for any elite minority that thought it had the intrinsic right to rule the people.

Bryan viewed his role as being a combined educator-spokesman for the common person. He believed that he had to convince the common man that the Democratic Party was the true friend of the average person because the Republican Party had become the slave of eastern money. Bryan actively sought to adapt the Jeffersonian ideal to a new era where America had been drastically changed by the advent of industrialization, big business, and finance capitalism. He believed that the rise of capital wealth created a new elite that plotted against the people and used government to enhance their own wealth and power. He argued that this new elite was a part of an age old battle between the people and the elite aristocracy which went by different names at different times. Bryan believed that some type of government protection in the economic sphere was necessary to salvage democracy from the moneyed class and sought to implement this idea into the basic philosophy of the Democratic Party. I contend that Bryan, while ultimately unsuccessful at the polls, used this guiding principle of saving democracy from an elite minority as the foundation for his political decisions. This attempt to change the Democratic Party was neither a reactionary nor demagogic attempt to salvage election victories, but rather a planned program that Bryan, and others, believed essential to saving the Democratic Party and the American democracy from the complete control of “moneyed” interests. Bryan began his quest at the state level and continued on after he gained control of the national party at the relatively young age of thirty-six.

While this dissertation will focus on William Jennings Bryan as a key instigator of change in the Democracy, it does not contend that Bryan was the only reformer within the Democratic ranks. The Democrats ran on reform platforms in 1896, 1900, and 1908. Bryan served as a transitional leader whose reform planks would later become part of Wilson's and Franklin Roosevelt's presidential programs. I intend to follow Bryan's career as Democratic Party leader viewed through the prism that he sincerely acted to save democracy from a growing elitist tyranny and this primary principle dictated his political moves. Viewing Bryan through the prism of his belief in a continuous battle between an elitist minority and the people lends a consistency to understanding his unique political career. It is consistent with Bryan's view, it stays within the realm of the actual events, and it best explains many of the inconsistencies that crop up in other interpretations.

The 1892 Congressional campaign was Bryan's last election triumph. His 1893 bid for the Senate and three Presidential campaigns failed. But Bryan did receive more votes in 1896 than any other Democratic nominee until Franklin D. Roosevelt. Programs he advocated appeared too radical, even frightening, to many voters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Other voters who were not frightened by his actual proposals feared he would owe his election to radicals and thus be forced to go too far to the left if elected. In the 1930s the Great Depression motivated many Americans to support Roosevelt's New Deal policies which in many ways reflected earlier proposals made by Bryan and other reform-minded politicians.

He became the transitional figure in the Democratic Party who led the Democracy from a laissez-faire attitude to a liberal position that sought to manipulate Jeffersonian

ideals so they could operate in an atmosphere influenced by finance capitalism, industrialization, and big business. Additionally, Bryan, partly through necessity, maintained that the methods of gaining office needed to change if the Democrats were to truly become the party of the people. This involved active campaigning, debates, off-year lectures and mailing lists that were geared to increasing popular involvement in the candidate selection process.

In addition to Bryan's influence on the Democrats, his image as a radical idiot who could influence voters influenced the Republicans to adopt some reform positions to allow big business to control reform. Bryan's platforms and reform positions reached fruition in the presidencies of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Bryan did not originate most of these reforms, but his rhetoric and popularity in the hinterlands made reform a mainstay of a mainstream political party.

This work will generally follow a chronological pattern. I will look at Democratic Party platforms, convention minutes, letters, and contemporary newspaper reports to discern whether or not Bryan maintained a planned agenda for capturing and reforming both the Democratic Party and the political system. Additionally, I will use Bryan's contemporary writings, speeches, government documents, and pertinent secondary literature. One area that I have pursued which may be considered controversial is my use of the *Columbus Telegraph* as a major source in Bryan's 1910 Nebraska battle with the liquor trust. Bryan did not have an outlet for state issues at that time. *Columbus Telegraph* editor Edgar Howard, a loyal Bryanite, nearly always followed Bryan's reasoning. When he disagreed with Bryan he specifically stated so in his editorials.

Contemporary Democrats like Gilbert Hitchcock considered the *Columbus Telegraph* a quasi-Bryan paper.

I will be treating Bryan as the center piece for deliberate change in the Democracy. I contend that Bryan deliberately sought to change the Democratic Party to save the people from corporate American. Bryan, particularly after he realized the magnitude of his oratorical ability, saw himself as having been called to his task. He considered intellectual pursuit outside of his religious and political work to be beyond the bounds of his calling. While not a part of this work, it is interesting that Bryan affected change best outside of office, as a Democrat in a solidly Republican state. Perhaps the question is unanswerable, but it is tempting to think that a person outside the party mainstream could not be influential in a state controlled by that same party.

This work tries to see the events through Bryan's guiding principle. At times this will make it appear as an apologetic for Bryan. Because I am seeking to look at events through Bryan's eyes, I use terms like plutocrat, aristocrat, and predatory wealth in the manner that he used these terms. The use of these terms does not imply that the ideas Bryan attributed to them are therefore proven. There is no intention to do this. This work does not intend to argue if Bryan was right or wrong. It seeks to understand Bryan in his own terms during his own time. Essentially this dissertation is an investigation of ideas, specifically the ideas of William Jennings Bryan and how he shaped them into his political career. In a manner of speaking I am trying to get into Bryan's head to understand how he thought the American political system could survive in an era of change.

There are four paths that need to be followed in understanding Bryan that have not been developed as of this date and cannot be pursued within the boundaries of this work. 1: We need a thorough biography of Mary Baird Bryan that investigates how much influence she had in Bryan's political activities. 2: Historians have generally considered Bryan's switch from supporting Champ Clark to Woodrow Wilson at the 1912 Democratic National Convention as a move to stop Champ Clark, but Bryan's behavior and personal views can be interpreted as an attempt to stop Oscar Underwood. Someone needs to look at the 1912 Baltimore Convention from an anti-Underwood perspective. 3: Historians have also failed to focus on the fact that Bryan's statements and actions after elections point to a man who really did not want to be president. Some of Bryan's political stances should be viewed from this angle. 4: Finally, as I do very briefly with the *Columbus Telegram*, some writer needs to see how effectively Bryan used local politicians and editors in the realm of local and state issues outside of Nebraska.

CHAPTER ONE

A New Beginning

When William Jennings Bryan moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, he thought he had left any chance of a political career behind him. The political situation in Nebraska, spurred on by the farmers' revolt, changed dramatically after his arrival. The farmers' revolt triggered a split in the dominant Republican Party that allowed Bryan, a reform Democrat, to win two congressional elections by forming a short lived coalition. Bryan viewed the American political scene as part of an ongoing struggle between everyday people and an elitist minority that sought to control government for its own ends. He believed he had a duty to use his political talents to protect and educate the people about that conflict and develop programs to safeguard against any elitist minority. This dissertation seeks to view Bryan through the prism of his own stated basic philosophy and to ascertain if that perspective best explains the phenomena of his political career.

After graduating from law school, Bryan started working his way up in the Jacksonville, Illinois, legal community. Since most of his legal business involved collections and the size and political conditions in Jacksonville made that city a dead end for Bryan, the young lawyer set his sights on other locations. The lack of a political or business future in Jacksonville did not prevent him from promoting Democratic causes. Bryan did campaign for the Democrats in Illinois, a common practice for young lawyers. In Jacksonville, he attempted to form a partnership with Russell Yates, another young

attorney, but a dispute over who should run for City Attorney prevented the partnership from forming.¹

In his Illinois speeches, Bryan championed the cause of popular control of government. He advocated controversial causes such as women's suffrage, low tariffs, and bimetallism as early as 1882. His position on prohibition is somewhat confusing in part because the term prohibition sometimes would be better rendered temperance. While Bryan definitely advocated temperance in his early career, his calls for prohibition were somewhat vague. As a college student Bryan had worked for former Senator Lyman Trumbull who instilled in Bryan an antagonism toward monopolies. Bryan, after visiting the Pullman Factory, predicted trouble for that company because of its exploitation of labor. What is significant is that Bryan began formulating many of his radical concepts before the Alliance movement promoted them in Nebraska.²

Bryan enjoyed reminding people that his life had been blessed by remarkable coincidences that seemed to guide his decisions. One such set of circumstances surrounded his move to Lincoln. The Illinois College Endowment Fund hired Bryan to handle some legal issues in Kansas for them. John Baird, his father-in-law, asked Bryan to look at some property he owned in Creston, Iowa. After consulting a map, Bryan realized that he must travel through either Lincoln or St. Joseph to get to Kansas from Creston, Iowa. His old college friend, Adolphus Talbot, had previously invited Bryan to

¹ William Jennings Bryan and Mary Baird Bryan, *The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan: by Himself and his Wife Mary Baird Bryan* (Chicago: The John C. Winston Company, 1925), 67,72.

² Paolo E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan: I. Political Evangelist 1860-1908* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 25; Louis W. Koenig, *Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: G.P. Putnam's & Sons, 1971), 40-43.

visit him in Lincoln. Bryan decided to fulfill all three missions on the same trip and visited Talbot on his way to Kansas.³

Adolphus Talbot, a conservative Republican, operated a successful law firm in Lincoln at the time he invited Bryan to visit. The two first met at Union College when Bryan played a practical joke on the more serious Talbot. The two formed a natural pair of opposites in their joint legal venture, with Bryan looking at the negative side of joint cases and Talbot pursuing the affirmative line. Bryan viewed Lincoln as a more lucrative city for a young lawyer, especially since he would be a Democrat in a capital of a Republican state. Lincoln, the capital of a fast growing state, seemed a natural venue for a young, ambitious lawyer. With the Nebraska Supreme Court in Lincoln, Bryan would be able to represent attorneys, especially Democrats, from distant counties who needed legal work done in Lincoln. Talbot introduced Bryan to a local Democratic newspaper editor who offered Bryan a column. Although Lincoln was the capital, it was an agricultural based city that readily welcomed democrats (small d) into their fold. During Bryan's visit to Lincoln, Talbot proposed forming a partnership. At Bryan's request, money obtained from Talbot's work with the Missouri Pacific Railroad was excluded from the agreement. When Bryan first decided to move to Lincoln, his motives were non-political since he believed election to office was out of the question.⁴

On his return to Illinois, Bryan discussed the move with his wife Mary, who readily agreed to the move. Mary remained in Jacksonville when Bryan returned to Lincoln on October 1, 1887. Politics were not in Bryan's mind when he made the move,

³ Bryan, *Memoirs*, 70-71.

⁴ Bryan, *Memoirs*, 70-76; Paolo E. Coletta, "William Jennings Bryan's First Nebraska Years," *Nebraska History* (June, 1952), 72; J.C. Long, *Bryan: The Great Commoner* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1928), 41.

yet the move became politically advantageous later. Bryan later remarked “Not a single reason that led me to favor the change materialized, but reasons that I never saw and could not therefore take into account justified the change.”⁵

Although Bryan believed his political career ended when he moved to Lincoln, he never entertained the idea of being apathetic. Talbot introduced him to local political leaders including W. B. Morrison of Hickman, a regular correspondent with J. Sterling Morton. Talbot and Bryan’s opposing political views did not affect their friendship. Indeed, Bryan remained true to his principle of favoring friendship over politics in relationships. Nor was it uncommon for representatives of opposing parties to be law partners in the late nineteenth century. Bryan and Talbot actually served as Lincoln party chairmen of their parties simultaneously. Bryan did not waste time in his new home. He passed the bar within two weeks of his arrival. Much of his early work involved collections, but he moved up quickly in the Lincoln legal society. He became attorney for the German National Bank in Lincoln.⁶

Lincoln itself was not unlike Jacksonville, Illinois. It boasted numerous churches and temperance societies. Lincoln was not home to much industrial development. Lincoln served as the state capital and home to the state’s university. Unlike Jacksonville, Lincoln was a growing city boasting over 40,000 residents and serving as the “principal radial railroad center west of the Missouri.” Bryan’s Presbyterianism helped counter the social handicap of his being a Democrat.⁷

⁵ Bryan, *Memoirs*, 74-76.

⁶ Bryan, *Memoirs*, 74, 76-83; Koenig, *Political Biography*, 54; Coletta, “First Nebraska Years,” 71-72.

⁷ Robert A. Cherny, *A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1985), 22; Long, *The Great Commoner*, 50; Koenig, *Political Biography*, 54.

Bryan lived as a bachelor for several months after his arrival in Lincoln. Bryan had a house built on D Street within walking distance of his Burr Block office. While awaiting completion of his home and Mary's arrival, He slept in his office and regularly skipped meals to save money. He visited his wife at Christmas, returning to Lincoln in January 1888. While in Jacksonville, he arranged for his real property to be sold.⁸

Bryan wished to avoid collections when he came to Lincoln, but his earliest work in Lincoln involved collections and tax foreclosures. Both Bryan and Talbot argued before all types of courts in all branches of law in Nebraska. Bryan's best work came in political disputes at the state Supreme Court level. He was a successful and skilled lawyer and even his political opponent Edward Rosewater acknowledged his abilities. He argued one state precedent setting case in which the court ruled that state officials must perform duties "without prepayment of fee" in criminal matters. A case closer to Bryan's heart prevented the government from subsidizing a Neligh sugar beet factory. He opposed government financing of big business, but his participation in this case would later hurt him politically.⁹

In June 1888, Mary Baird Bryan joined her husband in Lincoln when the family moved into the D Street house. Mary had been and would be a major influence politically and intellectually on Bryan. In 1888, she became the first woman to pass the Nebraska Bar exam. Her legal knowledge served as a counterpoint for Bryan when he prepared cases and political speeches. Like her husband, Mary actively participated in social and political clubs. She formed the Sorosis Club, a non-partisan political

⁸ Coletta, "First Nebraska Years", 72.

⁹ Bryan, *Memoirs*, 78-81; Coletta, "First Nebraska Years" 73; *Omaha Bee*, July 31, 1890.

discussion group in Lincoln, shortly after her arrival. She also participated in the Lincoln Chautauqua Society that met weekly to discuss political and religious issues.¹⁰

Bryan's Lincoln activities did not solely involve his legal practice and Democratic Party politics. He helped organize the Round Table, a literary-political discussion group that met informally to read and critique members' papers. The club, modeled after Sigma Pi, the literary society of Bryan's college years, struggled at first, but when club member Charles Dawes initiated a policy of providing refreshments, which made the meetings more congenial, the club became successful. *Nebraska State Journal* editor C. H. Gere and University of Nebraska Cadet Corps Commander John Pershing were other notable members of the Round Table. Additionally, Bryan taught Sunday school in his local Presbyterian Church and sat on the board of the local YMCA.¹¹

Nebraska Democrats were divided into factions in 1888. The Republicans tended to view the Democracy with little concern in 1888. When Governor Thayer and Bryan shared a stage for an 1889 St. Patrick's Day celebration, he did not know if Bryan was a singer or a speaker in spite of the fact that Bryan had regularly denounced Thayer during the previous campaign. The Nebraska Democracy was so weak that in 1890 their candidates consistently finished third in that election. Only one Nebraska Democrat had been elected to the house before 1890.¹²

¹⁰ Koenig, *Political Biography*, 54; Cherney, *Righteous Cause*, 24; Coletta *Political Evangelist*, 38; Bryan, *Memoirs*, 233; Long, *Great Commoner*, 50.

¹¹ Coletta, *Political Evangelist*, 38; Bryan, *Memoirs*, 59; Koenig, *Political Biography*, 54; *Nebraska State Journal* December 30, 1906.

¹² Bryan, *Memoirs*, 74,234; Long, *Great Commoner*, 50; Koenig, *Political Biography*, 57; James Olson, *History of Nebraska* 2nd Ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955, 1966), 216; *Nebraska Bluebook* 1892.

The split in the Democracy centered on two powerful leaders. J. Sterling Morton led the “slaughterhouse” Democrats who were opposed by Dr. George Miller’s “packinghouse” Democrats. Miller, owner of the *Omaha Herald* until 1887, had connections with the New York City machine and Samuel Tilden. Miller represented Tilden in Nebraska political affairs. Miller and his crowd were better situated to hand out patronage if the opportunity developed. Nationally the Democrats considered Miller the leader of the Nebraska democracy. Bryan did not desire patronage however, and Miller’s ultraconservatism and high tariff stance made him what historian Louis Koenig calls “a neo-Republican.”¹³

Nebraska City’s J. Sterling Morton was only slightly less conservative than Miller, but he did favor lower tariffs and opposed subsidies to big business. Additionally Morton opposed federal subsidies of any kind. Bryan’s main problems with Morton were his railroad connections. Morton, a Burlington lobbyist, tended to be callous toward farmers. He lumped homesteaders and the railroads together as persons receiving government subsidies. Morton had unsuccessfully tried fusion with the Antimonopolists before Bryan came to Nebraska and remained bitterly opposed to fusion as a result of that experience.¹⁴ Nebraska Democrats considered Morton their leader. Bryan believed that Morton was better for the state party than Martin who was so obviously controlled by New York. Additionally Morton, although not a reformer, held at least some views similar to Bryan’s. Bryan cast his lot with the Morton wing of the Democrats.¹⁵

¹³ Koenig, *Political Biography*, 57-58.

¹⁴ James F. Pedersen and Kenneth D. Wald, *Shall the People Rule: A History of the Democratic Party in Nebraska Politics, 1854-1972*. (Lincoln: Jacob North), 69; Homer Socolofsky, “Land Disposal in Nebraska, 1854-1906, the Homestead Story,” *Nebraska History* 48 no. 3, Fall 1967, 31.

¹⁵ Socolofsky, “Land Disposal,” 31; Cherny, *Righteous Cause*, 27.

The Nebraska Democrats differed socially from those in the “Egypt” section of Illinois. Comparatively few southerners immigrated to Nebraska after 1867. In 1888 two-thirds of Nebraskans were either foreign-born or first-generation Americans. The Irish, German, Czech, and Polish immigrants tended to side with the Democrats, in part because the Democrats opposed closing the saloons. In 1888 the Democrats only carried counties that held an immigrant majority. This condition would be problematic for the teetotaling Bryan.¹⁶

Bryan participated in party politics soon after his arrival in Lincoln. He came to town bearing letters of introduction from Illinois Congressman William Springer addressed to J. Sterling Morton and Lincoln attorney Jefferson Broady who was influential with *Omaha World-Herald* editor Edward Merritt. Bryan first wrote to Morton in November 1887, informing Morton that he had heard of his low tariff stance and requested a meeting with the “Sage of Arbor Lodge.” The two Democrats began a correspondence concerning government bounties and low tariffs. In May 1888, Bryan needed to go to Illinois on personal business, so he sent a letter to Morton requesting a meeting in Nebraska City. Bryan suggested that the high Republican tariff might create an opening for Democrats in the West. On May 25, 1888, Bryan responded to Morton’s acceptance of a meeting with a suggested itinerary.¹⁷

Morton took an immediate liking to the young Lincoln lawyer. At Morton’s suggestion, Bryan made speeches in Lincoln concerning the tariff, which he labeled “disbolism”. [Sic] Bryan likened the tariff to a cow “fed by western farmers and milked

¹⁶ Cherny, *Righteous Cause*, 27.

¹⁷ Coletta, “First Nebraska Years”, 76; William Jennings Bryan to J. Sterling Morton, 22 May 1888; 25 May 1888, J. Sterling Morton Papers Reel 14, Nebraska Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.