

LeRoy Postmaster Takes on the President



In 1851, the LeRoy Postmaster was embroiled in a nasty political fight. As was the custom at the time, postmasters were appointed at the pleasure of the President and his political party.

The situation in 1851 came about with the death of President Zachary Taylor in 1850 which made Vice President Millard Fillmore President. Both men were Whigs, but Fillmore and Taylor disagreed about Henry Clay's Compromise of 1850. It was known as the Fugitive Slave Law, and it helped defuse the issues leading up to the Civil War – at least for a while. Fillmore, who was from New York was against slavery, but he vehemently believed that the issue of slavery should be decided by each individual state and that the federal government should not be involved. He

was quoted as saying: “God knows that I detest slavery, but it is an existing evil, for which we are not responsible, and we must endure it, till we can get rid of it without destroying the last hope of free government in the world.” Fillmore came head to head with another New York Whig, William Seward, who believed that slavery was a federal issue.

The Compromise of 1850 mandated that slaves, who had escaped to a free state had to be returned to their owners. President Fillmore supported the Compromise to the letter of the law. There are accounts of federal agents in LeRoy searching for escaped slaves. Seward and others, disagreed and supported the Underground Railroad to free slaves and to help them make their way to Canada. Fillmore's followers became known as

the Silver Greys – (because Fillmore had a thick head of grey hair.) Fillmore immediately dismissed Taylor's Cabinet and replaced it with men of his choosing. Then, he began doing whatever he could to dismantle Seward's Whig Party of New York State. Because all of the postmasters were political appointments, that meant that the Silver Greys were ushered in.

The postmaster in LeRoy, was C.B. Thompson, a Whig, who was the editor of the LeRoy Gazette. Fillmore replaced him with J.H. Stanley, a Silver Gray. In the meantime, other postmasters in the area were threatened with removal. According to an article in the Gazette, the postmaster at Ronoke, Pavilion Centre, Muttonville, (still haven't figured out where Muttonville is – or was) and surrounding towns were required to “pledge never to write, speak or publish anything against the Compromise measures from this time henceforth. If they refuse their places will be filled with Silver Greys. When no person of this stripe can be found in any town where a removal is sought, a man must be imported from Buffalo or Rochester, to make the deficiency good. In the towns mentioned, we believe there is not a Silver Gray to be found of course an importation will be necessary. “ Obviously, C.B. Thompson, editor of the LeRoy Gazette, wouldn't sign the pledge. But he certainly used his newspaper to expose the situation. According to the LeRoy Gazette – (understanding that Thompson was the editor) – the people of LeRoy were incensed that Thompson was being replaced. A petition was circulated and signed by 600 men, attesting to Thompson's ability and qualifications for the job, and telling President Fillmore that he should not “meddle”

in the LeRoy post office business, but it was all for naught. Stanley claimed that there was a meeting of the Whigs to fill the postmaster's position, and he had won the vote by a substantial number. Someone pointed out that there weren't enough Silver Greys in LeRoy to win such a vote.

Millard Fillmore attempted to secure the Whig nomination for president in 1852 but was defeated by Gen Winfred Scott. During the Civil War he opposed succession, but disagreed with Lincoln's strategy. Fillmore retired and lived in Buffalo and founded the University of Buffalo. He served as it's first chancellor. Postmasters continued to be political appointments until 1969. Under President Nixon the job became a civil service position. It is somewhat amusing, that the National Association of Letter Carriers objected to the new law. They claimed that the old system was “far worse in theory than it is in practice.” In fact, the president of the Lettercarrier's union said: “I would prefer the judgment of politicians than I would the relatively bloodless and antiseptic processes which the Postmaster General proposes.”

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