BACK IN TIME

A local war hero tests the Presidential waters

By DICK SHEARER

Presidential elections aren't usually local events but 132 years ago the fight for the White House most certainly had Lansdale-area overtones.

Montgomery Township's own Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock, hero of the Battle of Gettysburg, won the Democratic Party's 1880 Presidential nomination on the second ballot at its convention in Cincinnati.

After the Civil War ended Hancock remained in the army and became its senior major general in 1872, but like a number of top Union officers he harbored an interest in running for public office. It was a time when political corruption, patronage and scandal ran rampant in Washington, and Hancock, revered for his common sense and honesty, seemed a good choice to reverse this trend.

Hancock's name first came up as a Presidential candidate as early at 1868 but it was not until 1876 when he unsuccessfully sought the nomination against New York Gov. Samuel Tilden that he was given serious consideration. Tilden, however, lost to Republican Rutherford B. Hayes who promised to be a one-term President.

Tilden chose not to seek the nomination in 1880, which cleared the path for Hancock. He was paired with William H. English of Ohio, who was added to the ticket to neutralize Republican nominee James A. Garfield, a congressman from the Buckeye state. Garfield's VP nominee was Chester A. Arthur.

Hancock had two assets that could have played to his advantage: His sterling reputation remained unblemished after the war, and he was well-known in the South where he played a key role in Reconstruction. It should be noted that in 1880 the GOP was the party of a strong federal government while the Democrats championed states' rights, a role reversal from today's political landscape.

Hancock's local roots run deep. He and his twin brother were born in 1824 in either Montgomery or Hatfield Township. As boys, their school teacher father moved the family from Montgomery Square to Norristown which eventually led Winfield to military school and the army.

Although Hancock left the North Penn area at a young age, his war exploits were a source of community pride here in the North Penn area. Never mind that this was GOP territory, local residents were turned on to the Hancock-Garfield campaign and closely followed highlights of the race in the city newspapers.

Out in Montgomery Township, plans were announced for a "mass meeting and pole-raising" in a 12-acre field on high ground between Bethlehem Pike and Horsham Road. Although it was not billed as a political rally, the October 14 *Reporter* noted that "the field affords a fine view of the surrounding country. Not the least among those arrangements is the fact that the house in which Gen. Hancock was born may be seen from the speakers' stands."

On the weekend before the November election, both parties staged political events designed to get

Hancock's failed bid for White House

out the vote. For example, in Hatfield, a Hancock-English rally - complete with dramatic orators and ear-deafening bands - took place on Friday night at Althouse's Hotel. The next evening, a Garfield-Arthur rally was held at Esser's Hotel after a torch-light procession wound its way through the village.

In an era when newspapers and the telegraph were the instruments of communication, campaigning was much different than it is today. The vast majority of voters never actually saw Hancock or Garfield in person.

Polling – in its infancy – was mere guesswork so just like today each party could produce numbers that showed their candidate was leading. One thing they seemed to agree on in 1880 was the likelihood of a close vote.

In a way it was. With about 9 million ballots cast, Garfield won by a margin of 1,898 votes; to this day, it's the closest popular vote in the nation's history. However the only votes that counted were cast by the electoral college and there Garfield scored a decisive 214-155 victory.

Remarkably, Hancock won in 53.7 percent of all the counties across the country but he was strongest in rural areas. Garfield's strength was in the cities where he piled up enough support to capture the more populated states' winner-take-all electoral votes.

Locally, Garfield outpolled Hancock by one vote out of 22,000 cast in Montgomery County. Hancock turned the tables in Bucks, winning by 242. Closer to home, Hancock was a 118-100 victor in Montgomery Township, but Garfield won 140-59 in Lansdale, 251-121 in Hatfield and by two votes in North Wales. Clearly, this remained GOP country.

When it was over, several authors have suggested Hancock wasn't overly disappointed by his defeat. He had tested the political waters and once was enough for him. A gracious loser, he even attended Garfield's inauguration.

We never got to know much about Garfield's ability to lead. On July 2, 1881, he was shot as he prepared to board a train in Washington. He lingered near death until September 19 when he finally passed away.

His assassin was among nearly 100,000 people who besieged the new Garfield for patronage jobs after his election and suffice it to say he wasn't selected. Ironically, the one major piece of legislation Garfield championed during his 200 days in office eventually led to creation of a civil service commission to rein in patronage.

Hancock resumed military duty as commander of the Military Division of the Atlantic the job he held before entering the Presidential race. He also served as president of the National Rifle Association and in 1885 presided over the funeral of Ulysses S. Grant. A year later, Hancock died of complications from an infected carbuncle. He is entombed at Norristown's Montgomery Cemetery.

Information for this story was gathered from a variety of sources including issues of the Lansdale Reporter and Wikipedia.