

Famous New Yorker William Almon Wheeler

When William A. Wheeler died, the *New York Times* claimed that, “There is not an important career in recent history about which the public have known so little.” Wheeler remains little known today, but his career shows how talent could lift an American from poverty to political prominence.

William Almon Wheeler was born in Malone, Franklin County, on June 30, 1819. His father was a popular lawyer who died without leaving his family an estate. The surviving Wheelers struggled financially, but William was able to attend Franklin Academy and enroll in the University of Vermont. A combination of eye trouble and lack of funds forced him to drop out after two years.

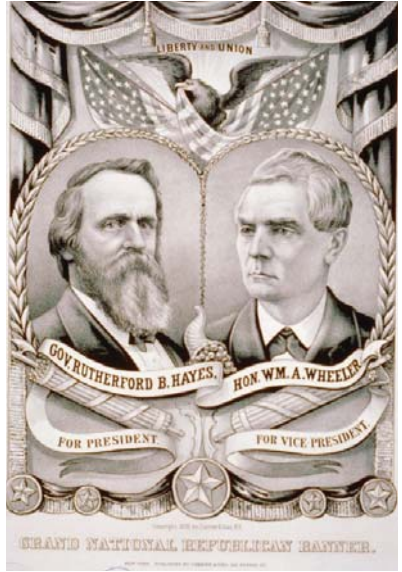
A college degree wasn’t necessary for an ambitious young man in the 19th century to become a lawyer. William “read law” under Franklin County District Attorney Asa Hascall while working as a teacher, and became a lawyer in 1845. While Wheeler built a practice, Hascall helped him make political connections. When Hascall retired in 1846, Wheeler succeeded him as district attorney. Wheeler was elected twice to the State Assembly as a member of the Whig party. After helping organize the Republican Party, he joined the State Senate in 1858. In private life, after throat problems forced him to quit the law, he became a banker and a managing trustee for the Northern Railroad.

During the Civil War, Wheeler served one term in the U.S. House of Representatives. After the war, he gained prestige by presiding over the 1867 state constitutional convention. Although the 1867 constitution wasn’t adopted, Wheeler earned a reputation for modesty and wisdom. He returned to Congress in 1869 and served four more terms. He won national attention as a negotiator by settling an election dispute in Louisiana. He proved his honesty by refusing to accept a pay raise from his peers or bribes from a corrupt bank.

By 1876, after the public learned that many congressmen had taken bribes, William A. Wheeler was one of the few prominent politicians untainted by scandal. Some mentioned him as a possible presidential candidate, but Wheeler refused to promote himself. When someone suggested him as a running mate for Rutherford B. Hayes, the eventual Republican nominee, Hayes admitted that he’d never heard of Wheeler. The Republicans finally nominated Wheeler for Vice-President as a compromise candidate. He followed tradition by rarely making speeches in his own behalf. Hayes and Wheeler won a controversial election after a negotiated settlement that ended the military occupation of the former Confederate states.

Although Wheeler and Hayes became friends, the new Vice-President had little power in the Hayes Administration. While Hayes sometimes sought his advice privately, Wheeler attended only one Cabinet meeting and felt unwanted. He focused on his main job as presiding officer of the U.S. Senate and joked that he “wasted away...with my starved expectations.” Wheeler didn’t seek the 1880 presidential nomination when Hayes refused to run again. He returned to New York in 1881 and ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate before retiring from politics. He died on June 4, 1887. While he never won real fame, William A. Wheeler earned the respect and votes of millions of Americans. He was an American success story by any standard.

For more information about Wheeler’s political career visit the U.S. Senate’s website at www.senate.gov. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA-Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2013.



Currier & Ives Lithograph - campaign banner for the 1876 Republican presidential ticket.

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Malone is located in Franklin County and is approximately 10 miles south of the Canadian border.