

John Rice Eden was my Great-grandfather. His daughter Rose married my grandfather, I.J. Martin – a Sullivan newspaper editor.

The Edens had moved – probably in 1801 – from Maryland to Bath County, Kentucky, where John R. was born in 1826. In 1831 the family moved to Rushville, Indiana. His father died in 1835 when he was 9 years old, leaving the family in what a local history referred to as “limited circumstances.” John R. worked on the farm, went to a log school house, and later taught school and studied law. At the age of 26, in 1852 he moved to central Illinois and became a member of the bar soon after. In 1856 he married Roxanna Meeker, daughter of a Sullivan blacksmith and farmer. The details of John R.’s life and political career may be found in a book I edited a couple of years ago, *John R. Eden, 1826-1909*, which can be

found on a local history web site for Moultrie County.

The Martins were already in the area when John R. Eden arrived. They had been early settlers of Coles County, and had relocated to the Whitley Point area of Moultrie County in the 1830's.

“John R.” – as most people called him – went on to become a five-term Congressman from Sullivan. He began his political career when he was elected States Attorney in 1856. Six years later, in 1862, he was elected to his first term in Congress, so he served two years during the Civil War. He was the Democratic Party's candidate for Governor of Illinois in 1868, losing badly to the Republican, General John M. Palmer. John R. was later elected to four other terms in Congress – three in the 1870's and for the

last time in 1884. When he was not serving in Congress, he practiced law in Sullivan and, briefly, in Decatur.

When I was growing up, our family didn't talk about John R. Eden. When I was in college, I read a little about the Copperheads; but about all I remember is thinking that the Copperheads must have been pretty bad folks. After all they were named after poisonous snakes. Lincoln was our greatest President – and these Copperheads were opponents of Lincoln, so they must have been pretty misguided. Their leader, Clement Vallandigham had been found guilty of something awful and exiled to Canada. And, to make things worse, my Great-grandfather Eden was one of these Copperheads.

Then, at some point I read about the Charleston riot. My Great-grandfather was not only there – here – but a speech he was supposed to give might have been one cause for the rioters to assemble. Were the rioters Copperheads? They were fighting with the Union soldiers whose job was to save the Union. Were these rioters therefore bad guys like Vallandigham? And was Great-grandfather – if not a supporter of riots – at least an encourager of resistance to the military effort to save the Union?

A. The Copperheads

Over the past 30 years or so, as time has permitted, I've tried to learn about the history of my several antecedent families – both paternal and maternal. The results are summarized in several books and monographs, which appear on my local history web site. The most recent one is a

compendium of materials about John R. Eden. The work of preparing that book took me back over his career, his pre-Civil War writings, his speeches in Congress, and his letters. It also took me more deeply into the political history of the period.

My view now is that despite their name, which was given to them by their political opponents, most of the Copperheads – including John R. Eden – were supporters of the Union and the war effort. They were very far from traitors. Article III, Section 3, of the Constitution defines “treason” as “levying War against [the United States], or in adhering to their enemies, giving them aid and comfort.” Conviction would require that they had committed some “overt Act.”

The Copperheads – so-called by the Republicans - were Democrats, political opponents of the Lincoln administration. They did not all agree with each other on everything. But they did write and speak against the Administration on several major points. It's important to be clear about what they supported, as well as what they opposed.

- In the main the Copperheads supported the Union. They opposed the effort by Southern states to break away from the Union, and supported the military effort to put down that effort by force.

- They voted for the expenditure of money and the raising of troops to sustain that military effort.

- They criticized the Administration's management of the War – the failure to win battles, the expenditure of moneys, the corruption incident to many contracts for supply of equipment and other military necessities.

- They attacked the Administration's infringements on civil liberties – the suspension of habeas corpus, the prosecution of civilians in military courts, and the prosecution of political figures and editors for criticism of the President and his policies.

- When in September 1862 the President announced the preliminary emancipation proclamation, based on his asserted “war power,” they criticized the policy behind the

proclamation and also argued that he lacked constitutional authority to implement that policy.

- Some – but not all – urged that steps be taken to try to achieve an armistice that might lead to an honorable peace between North and South, and to restoration of the union “as it was.”

- They did not interfere with the military draft. The biggest Northern incident of opposition to the War effort occurred in New York in July 1863 – only 10 days after the victory at Gettysburg. One source calls it the “largest civil insurrection in American history outside of the Civil War itself.” (Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: American’s Unfinished Revolution* (1988), at 32.) But the New York

draft riots were not the result of any Copperhead efforts to undermine the war effort. They were in part the result of discontent by Irish immigrants and other working-class men who opposed the draft – especially the provision that allowed the wealthy to hire substitutes and thus avoid the draft. As the rioting expanded, it also became a deadly manifestation of racial hatred against black people living in New York.

Much smaller anti-enrollment or anti-draft riots occurred in other places – including two in Illinois, one in Lake County, and one in Fulton County.

To sum up – subject to a few exceptions – Democratic or Copperhead opposition to the Lincoln

Administration (1) took the form of words – not action, and (2) the criticism was aimed not at the military effort to subdue the Southern rebellion but rather at the Administration’s supposed inefficiency, corruption, interference with Civil liberties, and the expansion of war aims to include emancipation.

For those of us old enough to remember the violent opposition to the Vietnam War by the so-called Weathermen and other domestic terrorists that took place in Chicago in October 1969 as well as other places and times, the most remarkable thing is *how little* violent or illegal action there was in the North against the Lincoln Administration’s war policies, and how relatively insignificant were any concrete steps to undermine the war effort.

It is well known that Stephen Douglas, the Democratic candidate for President in 1860, became a strong supporter of the Lincoln Administration's efforts to put down the rebellion. Unfortunately, he died on June 3, 1861, just as the war was beginning.

Clement Vallandigham, the Ohio Democrat most strongly identified with the Copperheads, was a Congressman when the war began. He was a vigorous critic of the Lincoln Administration but, like Douglas, did not initially criticize the effort to subdue the South by force. He was defeated for re-election to Congress in the 1862 elections.

However, in January 1863, his term not yet concluded, Vallandigham delivered a forceful speech in Congress declaring that he did not believe the South could be forced back into the Union, that lives

and money were being wasted, and that turning the war into a crusade for abolition was unconstitutional. He urged that the North simply stop fighting, and proposed a unilateral armistice.

As Frank Klement summarized the reaction in his book on *The Copperheads* (at 118), “Most Midwestern Democrats were unwilling to accept Vallandigham’s unrealistic program. ... They were opposed to an armistice.”

General Ambrose Burnside, in charge of the Department of the Ohio in 1863, believed that criticism of the Administration was treasonous. In April he issued his General Orders No. 38, proclaiming that “the habit of declaring sympathy for the enemy” would no longer be tolerated, and that anyone who committed “acts for the benefit of our

enemies” would be “tried as spies or traitors.”

Democrats responded by criticizing Burnside’s order for infringing on the right of free speech and for declaring that alleged violators would be tried in military rather than civilian courts.

Vallandigham again spoke out – on May 1, 1863 – criticizing the Administration for changing its war objectives to include emancipation, and criticizing the Administration in harsh language. He went so far as to invite his listeners to defy arbitrary orders – to make clear that “they will not submit to such restrictions upon their liberties” (Klement, at 91.)

Burnside then had Vallandigham arrested. A Dayton newspaper called his “kidnapping” a “dastardly outrage.” A liquor-induced riot ensued, and a pro-Administration newspaper building was

burned. Burnside then declared martial law throughout the county. Vallandigham was promptly tried and found guilty by a military tribunal. President Lincoln “regretted” Burnside’s action and changed Vallandigham’s sentence to one of banishment to the Confederacy. From there he made his way to Canada.

Vallandigham later returned unbothered from Canada and ran for Governor of Ohio in 1863. He continued to advocate for peace and compromise, but was soundly defeated in October of that year.

Rumors of alleged secret societies – auxiliaries of the Democratic Party, comparable to the Union League auxiliaries of the Republicans – circulated in 1863. One of these alleged groups was called the Knights of the Golden Circle, which was founded by

a charlatan named Bickley before the Civil War even began.

Other rumors hovered over an organization called the “Sons of Liberty,” started by an Indiana politician named Harrison Dodd. It was unrelated to the rumored knights of the Golden Circle. The Sons of Liberty had an Illinois adjunct – on paper at least – and it seems to have attracted recruits; but it’s not clear how much they did other than hold meetings.

A third group was organized in Missouri by a man named Phineas Wright, who called his group the Order of American Knights.

There was even an attempt to merge these latter two groups into a “new” Sons of Liberty. The co-founder, Dodd, tried to interest Vallandigham into

assuming the leadership of this organization. As Klement tells the story, one of their supporters, a man named Hunt, told Vallandigham that “he believed it advisable to give aid to the Southern rebels.”

“Vallandigham rudely interrupted. Visibly angry, he gave Hunt a severe castigation. ... He might be a critic, but he was no traitor!”

(Klement, at 175.)

A longer and clearly self-serving version of Vallandigham’s rejection of any assistance to the Confederate cause is set forth in the biography of him written by his brother, *A Life of Clement L. Vallandigham*, by James Vallandigham. (Baltimore, 1872, at 372 *et seq.*) According to his brother, when Vallandigham became aware in late May 1864 that one of his supporters was “actually in favor of

assisting the South,” Vallandigham became
“violently excited”:

“With flashing eye and clenched fist he denounced the stupidity of the men who were willing to precipitate a revolution and fight for a government which, if successful ... would consider them aliens and outcasts. ‘I will fight for no cause,’ he exclaimed, ‘wherein victory itself is dishonor. ... Not a hand shall be offered to assist the Southern people nor a shot fired in their favor if I can control the Sons of Liberty, until it is distinctly understood that the idea of permanent disunion is entirely given up and completely abandoned. If I hear of any further developments, under existing circumstances, of attempts of members of

our order to assist the Southern Government, I will myself inform the Lincoln Administration, and see that the authors of a worse than abortive revolution are promptly punished.”

Vallandigham’s brother’s biography acknowledged that despite all of Clement’s “efforts and watchfulness, some members of the Sons of Liberty “were induced to join in plans of action which rendered them liable to the charge of treason.” He says these plans were “industriously encouraged by” Federal detectives. When Clement was informed of these plans, “his indignation knew no bounds. “What do these men mean,” he cried, “by acting against my express orders?” (*Id.*, at 378.)

Because of disagreements among the leaders and also perhaps the effectiveness of government detectives, the Sons of Liberty disintegrated without ever becoming an effective organization. Although he was the supposed leader, according to Klement's account, Vollandigham never issued an order or called a meeting.

B. John R. Eden

So where was John R. Eden on this political spectrum – extending from supporter of the Northern war effort ... to unilateral peacenik ... to traitor?

Clearly he was a supporter of Stephen Douglas before the Senator's death. He did not overlap in Congress with Vollandigham, who was defeated for re-election to Congress in 1862 – the same year Eden was elected for the first time.

For the pre-War period, the only source I have for Eden's political views is the columns of the *Sullivan Express*, which are reproduced in my book and appear on my local history web site. Basically he wrote against extremism in both the North and South. He believed that the Abolitionists in the North and the Fire-eaters in the South fed off each other, and that together they jeopardized the Union. His principal objective was to preserve the Union.

Eden received the Democratic nomination for Congress on September 2, 1862, and 8 days later was at the party's state convention in Springfield. He served on the committee on resolutions, so the resolutions adopted by the convention are probably a reflection of his personal political views. Those

resolutions may be summarized as follows (*Eden Compendium*, John George, at 421):

- All citizens should “*aid in the legal suppression* of the rebellion.” The convention thanked the “brave men” who had fought in the Union army. (Emphasis supplied.)

- The convention condemned both Southern extremists who had started the war and the Northern extremists whose methods “will leave to the nation but little hope for the restoration of the Union.”

- The convention opposed emancipation of the slaves, unlawful military arrests, the stifling of free speech and free press, and corruption of the administration;

- The convention opposed emancipation as a war aim and called for enforcement of a state law prohibiting the immigration of Negroes.

In late May 1863, Eden was one of several speakers at the Indiana state Democratic convention in Indianapolis. Several arrests were made for carrying concealed weapons. It's not known what Eden said, but the convention adopted a resolution denouncing illegal arrests of those who opposed the war effort and extended sympathy to Clement Vallandigham for his imprisonment by General Burnside. (*Id.*, at 424).

A month later, in June 1863, a convention of Democrats in Springfield, Illinois, passed similar

resolutions criticizing arbitrary arrests and declaring (*id*, at 425):

The further offensive prosecution of this war tends to subvert the Constitution and government and entails on this nation all the disastrous consequences of misrule and anarchy. (Emphasis supplied.)

Did this “peacenikian” resolution express Eden’s personal views? Perhaps – we don’t know. It expresses opposition to “further offensive prosecution of this war” and would therefore be inconsistent with Eden’s earlier support for “legal suppression of the rebellion.”

By the time the 38th Congress, to which Eden had been elected in 1862, met for the first time on

December 7, 1863, the complexion of the war had completely changed because of the Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg.

During the 38th Congress, Eden spoke infrequently. His one major address was given on February 27, 1864, in which he responded to Lincoln's reconstruction proposals. His premise was that "The General Government ... is in duty bound to suppress insurrection." He then argued that the Administration had no power to emancipate the slaves or otherwise "overthrow the rights and established institutions of any of the States." (*Eden Compendium at 256-57.*) He pointed out that calls for troops and taxes had been supported "without a murmur because these contributions to the public Treasury were to be consecrated to the sacred purpose of saving the Union." (*Id.*)

So – Eden’s theme was not that the Confederacy should not be put down. It was rather a complaint that it had not been put down already.

He said:

Mr. Chairman, I am a friend of the Union; my love for it is so strong that I am not willing to give up a single State. When I see a hand raised to strike down and blot out a single star from the flag of my country, *whether the blow be directed by the traitor in arms* or by a more insidious enemy seeking to effect the same and by undermining and subverting the Constitution, I will interpose my feeble efforts to ward off the blow. I would save

the Union, because the Union is necessary to secure the prosperity, the liberties, and the happiness of the people.

In closing, he added,

The policy of the Democracy embraces conciliation and compromise, *along with whatever force may be necessary to the due execution of the laws*, and a firm, unfaltering devotion to constitutional liberty, and a determination as immovable as the everlasting hills to maintain it. (Emphasis supplied.)

Two days after Eden's big speech in the House, on February 29, 1864, Congressman Long of Ohio introduced an elaborate peace resolution, which

declared war to be an improper instrument for the settlement of the issues at stake and urged appointment of a peace commission. Eden voted for it, but it was soundly defeated. (*Id.*, at 429.)

Congressman Schenk of Ohio then introduced several resolutions, one of which called for putting down the rebellion and removing the causes for it. The vote for it was unanimous, and included Congressman Eden. (*Id.*, at 430.)

So – on the same day, Eden voted for declaring war an improper instrument for settling the issues and, at the same time, for putting down the rebellion. It’s hard to reconcile the two votes, but perhaps if one had been there on the floor that day and knew all the details, they would be reconcilable.

Five weeks later, on April 8, 1864, Congressman Long again spoke in favor of peace, saying he could not see “restoration [of the Union] by the power of the bayonet.” Congressman Harris of Maryland gave an agitated speech, declaring himself a “radical peace man,” and “for acquiescence in the doctrine of secession.” A resolution to declare Harris’ remarks treasonable failed, with Eden voting against. Another resolution to censure Harris’ speech passed, with Eden voting against. (*Id.*, at 439.) His vote against censure was clearly a vote in favor of free speech – not in support of secession.

Perhaps just as important, these speeches and votes lay in the arena of speech and politics – not conduct. John R. Eden, though an opponent of the Lincoln Administration, supported the Union and never did anything to undercut the war effort.

What is more, so far as I can tell, neither did Clement Vallandigham or any other prominent Democrat of the period. Attacks on the Copperheads as traitors or supporters of the Confederate rebellion can be understood better as efforts to smear and embarrass the Democrats in the elections of 1862 and 1864 than as objective attempts to describe reality. Politics wasn't bean-bag then any more than it is now.

Any embarrassment Eden's descendants may have today stems not from either his speech or conduct with respect to the War, but rather his objections to Emancipation, his vote against the 13th Amendment, and his views on Negroes.

C. The Charleston Riot

What then about the Charleston riot that we remember this weekend? Where did the conduct of the rioters fall on the political spectrum ranging from support for the Administration to treason?

I think the right answer is: nowhere.

Professor Peter Barry's fine book provides plenty of evidence that the riot stemmed from personal animosities and liquor – rather than an ideologically or politically-motivated assault on the Lincoln Administration. Or as Barry gracefully expressed it, the riot was a “violent, localized fight that was ignited by personal animosities and driven more by alcohol, emotions, and grudges than by political passions and patriotism.” (Barry, at 70).

The animosities had several roots:

One was a dance held in nearby Clark County in February, a month before the Charleston affair.

Nelson Wells, a Copperhead, and Oliver Sallee, a Northern soldier, were both there – apparently vying for the attentions of a girl named Daugherty. A free-for-all ensued. (Barry, at 29.) The first violent act of the Charleston Riot a month later occurred when Wells – allegedly – pulled a pistol and attempted to fire at Sallee in response to an insult. Another Copperhead then shot Sallee, who in turn fired at Wells, killing him. (*Id.*, at 45.)

A second root was the practice of Union soldiers of roaming the downtown areas of Charleston and Mattoon, accosting known Democrats, forcing them to their knees, and compelling them to swear to

support the Lincoln Administration and all its proclamations. (*Id.*, at 28.) Judge Constable, who was sitting on the bench that day in Charleston, had been subject to this mistreatment in Mattoon only a couple of months before. Several local Copperheads – including James O’Hair, Robert McLain, and Frank Toland – had been involved in fights with soldiers. Who started these altercations can’t be known. What can be known is that these fights – not some distorted political idealism or hostility to the Lincoln Administration – laid the groundwork for the riot.

This practice of Union soldiers looking for evidence of disloyalty on the part of Democrats no doubt extended well beyond Coles County. My grandfather, I.J. Martin, who married John R. Eden’s daughter Rose, wrote a memoir when he was in his 80’s. His family lived in Whitley Township,

Moultrie County, just west of Mattoon and the Coles-Moultrie County line. This is what he remembered about the War (*Fragments of Martin Family History*, Chicago, 1990, at 157):

The soldiers stationed at Mattoon occasionally made night raids into the country, and sometimes entered the homes of Democrats, seizing guns or searching for evidence of disloyalty. We were never disturbed, but I remember one night someone tapped on a window and then said the soldiers were out on another raid. Mother was alarmed, but Father said there was no danger. He stepped outside and listened awhile before going back to bed. Later I was told that one night Father [and a neighbor] kept vigil at a point where they

could watch both their homes, but I knew nothing about it at the time.

Neither of them belonged to any club or political organization, and neither did any wild talking, so that none of the spies would have had anything to report to the Mattoon camp.

In addition to the personal animosities and the mistreatment by soldiers, there was the liquor – probably consumed in generous quantities on both sides.

In any event, the Sons of Liberty had nothing to do with it. Professor Barry quotes the testimony of James L. Rock, a member of Sons of Liberty, who explained that the rioters were criminals, “that they

had brought the matter upon their own heads, and the Sons of Liberty were not responsible for them.” (*Id.*, at 67.) Captain John Eastin wrote his friend President Lincoln a letter explaining that the soldiers had been drinking and that, “It was a small quarrel and conflict between a few soldiers on furlough and their friends on one side and the O’Hairs and their friends on the other side. There was no resistance to military or civil authority” (*Id.*, at 90.)

Professor Barry’s book points out that when John R. Eden arrived in Charleston about 2 o’clock, he found the situation tense, cancelled his speech, and “joined others in advising fellow Democrats to return home or to seek refuge in the courthouse.” (*Id.*, at 43.)

Two weeks after the riot, Congressman Eden – by this time safely back in Washington – wrote his wife Roxa a long letter describing the events of that day. It may be found in the book I recently edited about John R. Eden (*John R. Eden, A Compendium of Materials*, 2012, at 96.) In the letter, John R. wrote that “none of the accounts” that he had seen – presumably the newspaper accounts – were “true.” He proposed to tell her what he saw and heard:

I reached Charleston between one and two o'clock and stopped there, no more apprehensive of danger than I now am.

When at Mattoon I heard from citizens and soldiers that the soldiers at Charleston were to come to Mattoon on the next train, which would leave Charleston between two and three o'clock. ... When I went up to the

Hotel at Charleston I saw that there were a good many people in town and a very considerable number of soldiers, many of whom were drunk. The word there also was that the soldiers were to leave there on the next train going west. As soon as I got my dinner I went over to the court house. On the way I saw that there was a good deal of excitement and heard that a number of citizens had been badly abused by the soldiers during the day. When I went in to the court house, the court being in session, I told my friends that owing to the excitement I did not deem it prudent to speak. ...

Eden then went out to the south side of the square and walked around to the north side. He continued:

We saw a crowd of soldiers coming up from toward the Depot. They were very noisy but we could not tell what they said. At this point we met a friend coming up from the same direction who remarked to us,

There is going to be trouble, the Colonel has countermanded the order for them to leave on this train, and they are coming up here swearing that they are going to clean out the Copperheads.

We went in to the court house. The west door was fastened on account of the wind blowing very hard from that direction. In about five minutes after we went in, I heard a fierce yell just west of the courthouse, followed almost immediately by a single

pistol shot. After an interval of perhaps a half a minute, there was a volley and a great many shots fired in rapid succession. The balls came in at the windows of the court house, rattling against the walls of the house ... like hailstones in a hail storm.... With what light we had on the subject, we deemed it prudent to leave, which we did. We walked out two miles East where we waited ...

After some further time, Eden went on by wagon, and then by horseback to the town of Marshall, where he caught a “hack” for Terre Haute and from there a train back to Washington. He added that he had heard how the fight commenced from four or five gentlemen who saw it from the beginning, and that “their account ... puts the blame

almost entirely upon a few drunken soldiers.” He added, “I will not vouch for the truth of anything that I did not see.”

Great-grandfather Eden may have received his information from four or five gentlemen who were Democrats, and their account may have been slanted. But – again – whatever disagreement there may have been about who started the brawl, there seems to be no evidence that it stemmed from any anti-Administration or anti-War sentiments. The roots of the violence were of a wholly different character than those which led to the Days of Rage we old-timers remember almost half a century ago.

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So now, after digging a bit more into the politics of the Civil War era, I'm reassured that Great-grandfather was a Union man after all, as were most of the so-called Copperheads.

Family tradition reports that during the last two years of the war, John R. Eden went to the White House to meet with President Lincoln and learn first-hand about the progress of the war effort. Eden had known the President for many years – ever since Lincoln in 1852 had served as one of his bar examiners – and he, like Lincoln, had practiced law in the old Seventeenth Judicial District in central Illinois.

Eden referred to one of his meetings with Lincoln at the White House in a letter to his wife a month before the Charleston Riot.

One of John R.'s granddaughters, Mabel George, many years later wrote a long manuscript about the history of the Eden and Meeker families. Her account of Eden's political career during the War years does not footnote her sources, but is supported by or consistent with published sources. No doubt much of what she wrote was passed down to her by her father, John R.'s son-in-law. She reported one episode that I have not seen anywhere else, but it seems appropriate to quote it here. (*John R. Eden Compendium*, at 387.) She wrote that, after the Charleston Riot,

John R. had been back in the capital city only a few days when he was summoned to appear before the President. Lincoln rebuked him for causing a riot with his

speech in Charleston, and when John R. said ‘But, Mr. President ...’ Lincoln stopped him by saying, ‘Wait until I have finished, Mr. Eden. Then I will hear what you have to say.’

He continued to reproach John R. for things he had said in his speech and gave him a lecture on the proper behavior of a congressman and loyal American.

Twice John R. tried to break into the harangue but was told to be quiet. When the President had said all he wanted to say, he ended with, ‘Now, Mr. Eden, what do you have to say?’

‘Mr. President, what I have been trying to tell you is that the riot in Charleston could not have been caused by anything I said, because I did not speak. There was no Democratic rally held that afternoon. The meeting was broken up by the gunfire of the drunken soldiers before the program started. And now, Mr. President, may I be excused?’

Lincoln studied a minute, looking straight across into steady, blue eyes on the same level with his own. What he saw there convinced him that John R. was telling the truth. ‘Mr. Eden,’ he said, ‘if I have misjudged you, I am sorry. I will look into the matter and we will discuss it again.’

The two Illinoisans shook hands and John R. left the room.

Did President Lincoln and the Copperhead Congressman have that White House meeting?

It would be nice to think so. But as Casey Stengel once supposedly said – “Whom knows!”