

GOP conventions are a Philadelphia tradition



GET READY, Philadelphia. Next week the elephant returns, as the City of Brotherly Love will once again play host to the Republican National Convention. And if this one is

anything like the last five that noble city experienced, it should be a real circus. That's right. Philadelphia is no stranger to the Republican Party. Having hosted GOP conventions in 1856, 1872, 1900, 1940 and 1948, the city has often anticipated the political fortunes and misfortunes of the so-called Grand Old Party.

At the time of its founding in 1854, the Republican Party was organized as a solution to the most controversial issues of the day including slavery, free speech and returning power to the states.

Although the party was established in Ripon, Wisc., by anti-slavery activists who believed that government should grant western lands to settlers free of charge, the first official meeting did not take place until July 6, 1854 in Jackson, Mich.

But it was in Philadelphia in 1856 that the Republicans became a national party. Five times over the course of a century, the city would be the focal point for Republican candidates hoping to secure their party's nomination for president. Here are few highlights of the previous conventions:

- 1856: Politics were as confused locally as they were at the national level. Philadelphia had been largely influenced by conservative businessmen and lawyers who voted the Whig ticket and were abandoned when the lack of a strong stand on slavery destroyed their party nationally. The new Republican

COMMENTARY

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party filled the void.

Holding its first national convention in Philadelphia at the Musical Fund Hall on Locust Street, the Republicans nominated John C. Fremont as its candidate for president under the slogan "Free soil, free labor, free speech, free men, Fremont."

But Philadelphia's local party members were hesitant to support a "black" abolitionist Republican, so they emphasized the tariff issue, which was hugely popular in the emerging industrial city.

It didn't matter. Pennsylvanian James Buchanan, the Democratic nominee, eked out a victory in the city as well as in the November election, becoming the nation's next president.

- 1872: Mayor William B. Stokely was as firmly ensconced in City Hall as the corrupt Republican machine which put him in there. He gave contracts to friends and was not above stuffing ballot boxes. The Republican tone which prevailed in the city was underscored on June 6 when the national convention, held at the Academy of Music, unanimously renominated Ulysses S. Grant, whose administration was almost as corrupt as Stokely's.

- 1900: The Republican hegemony of Philadelphia politics continued under the graft-ridden leadership of the Vare Brothers — George A. and Edwin H. who were state senators and Congressman William S. — all of whom were former pig farmers who descended to careers in Republican politics. Their conduct was so arrogant that the famed literary artist Lincoln Steffens called

Philadelphia "the most corrupt and contented city in the nation." Thanks to their support, William McKinley was renominated for a second term in the White House.

- 1940s: While the popularity of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal seemed to result in a series of Democratic victories, including one for governor and another for the U.S. Senate, Philadelphians continued to elect Republican mayors. Its status as a "swing city" was recognized by all the parties which came there for their national conventions.

In June 1940 the Republicans arrived to nominate Wendell Wilkie, only to witness FDR's re-election for a third straight term.

Eight years later in June 1948, the elephant returned, this time to nominate New York Gov. Thomas E. Dewey. The Democrats, who also held their convention in the city, nominated Harry S. Truman, who ultimately won the general election in November.

History shows us then that only two of the five Republican candidates nominated there went on to capture the presidency.

Considering that President Bill Clinton carried Pennsylvania and neighboring New Jersey in both the 1992 and 1996 elections, Philadelphia is critical to a GOP victory. George W. should take nothing for granted. He may want to spend some serious time cultivating our politicians.

William Kashatus, a Wyoming Valley native, is a historian at the Chester County Historical Society, where the exhibit, "Our Next President: a History of Presidential Campaigns" is on view. He is author of "One-Armed Wonder: Pete Gray, Wartime Baseball and the American Dream." A longer version of this commentary appears in the Philadelphia Daily News.