

Frank Blair Jr.

Introduction

Frank Blair Jr. began his political career as a Democrat, believing strongly that slavery was undermining the system of free labor. As the Democratic Party in Missouri became more militant in its support of slavery it no longer had a place for his ideas. After Thomas Hart Benton's death he fled the party to form the Republican Party in Missouri. The new Republican Party grew strong in St. Louis as a result of the influx of immigrants from New England and Germany.

During the War

The party's strength in St. Louis combined with Blair's connections in Washington (his brother was in Lincoln's Cabinet, as was his friend Edward Bates) helped him make large contributions in support of the Union during the secession crisis. He was instrumental in achieving the removal of General William Harney and the promotion of General Nathaniel Lyon; he orchestrated the militarization of the St. Louis Wide Awakes, who were integral in the capture of Camp Jackson; he was central to the removal of General John C. Frémont; and he pulled numerous strings behind the scenes resulting in the appointment of countless federal officials in Missouri. In addition, he served in the Union army, fighting in Georgia and the Carolinas.

Postwar

After the war, Blair had a clear agenda. He wanted to end slavery and move all African Americans out of the country. In 1858 he said, "It is certainly the wish of every patriot that all within the limits of our Union should be homogeneous in race and of our own blood." When it became clear this was not going to be the outcome of emancipation Blair was willing to abandon his ideas of colonization. He gave a speech in Kentucky just following the war in support of the 13th Amendment, saying that they should ratify it "to make the best of the circumstances that surround them."

Ultimately Blair split with the radical wing of the Republican Party because they began to urge suffrage for African Americans and harsh restrictions on ex-Confederates, which Blair opposed, saying "Those whom we contended, whom we aspersed as Rebels, and whom we triumphed over as well, they were worthy of the steel of our best." With the ascendancy of the radicals nationally, Blair's agenda for Reconstruction seemed lost. Fearing the direction of the nation, in 1868 Blair signed along with former president Andrew Johnson, chief justice Salmon Chase, and former secretary of state William Seward a new "Declaration of Independence" which stated that the Radicals desired "the establishment of an absolute negro tyranny over the white men of these states." By the time of the 1868 presidential election Blair had become the vice presidential candidate for the Democratic Party. He lost the vote, and with it his credibility as a national political figure. The cover of *Harper's Weekly* after Ulysses S. Grant's Republican victory showed a drunken Blair passed out underneath a triumphant Grant on a bucking horse. In Blair's hand is a flag that reads "rebellion," indicating that the public had come to associate him with the very rebellion he had fought against.