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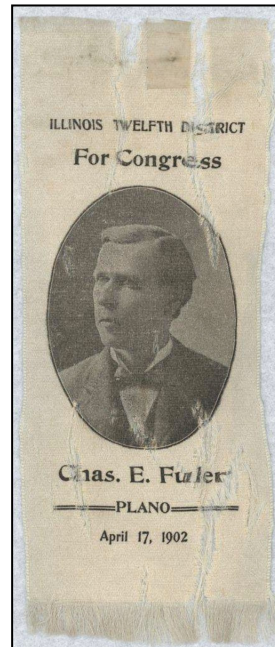
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Congressional Campaign Ribbons

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***Figure 1. Charles E. Fuller campaign ribbon, 1902,
Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives.***

When Charles Fuller pinned campaign ribbons on his supporters in 1902, he little realized how soon that gesture would be a thing of the past. To be sure, using trinkets and throw-aways to win votes was as old as electioneering itself. Political ribbons, however, are a relatively recent and short-lived phenomenon. From 1824 to the turn of the last century, they reigned supreme as the most portable, wearable and popular piece of public ephemera. They were virtually the sole method by which individual candidates like Charles Fuller could associate themselves with individual voters. The ribbon's rise was due to a confluence of new technology and new political gusto. But in the decade when Charles Fuller came to Congress, the political ribbon abruptly dropped out of common use. Its fall was as much tied to changes in technology and political campaign practices as its rise. How that happened, and what purposes ribbons served during their existence are the topics of this paper. The questions are basic ones. There is as yet no scholarship on congressional campaign ribbons. Indeed, research on campaign ribbons generally is scarce on the ground. This paper is an initial attempt to place the political vehicle that was ascendant for most of the 19th century into intellectual, technological, and political context, using the collection of the U.S. House of Representatives as a starting point.

Why do campaign ribbons exist? They are emblems, an attempt to manifest, physically and individually, a collective mind-set. From the Enlightenment forward, they represented an increasing orientation toward the individual, and the self, and the search for meaning. The search was conducted in the context

of a pluralistic participatory democracy. Fuller's ribbon was worn by an individual – the evidence of a safety pin is there – seeking to proclaim something. American congressional campaign ribbons, and political ribbons in general, are interesting because they are a personal adornment worn by Americans, narrating an American experience in American language. It's hard to recapture the relative novelty of clothing with words on it today, in the era of graphic t-shirts. In the 19th century it would be a more momentous statement of affiliation to place someone else's image on your chest, particularly for the express purpose of drawing strangers' attention to it. That narrative, pinned on the body, marked moments of conflict, commemoration and celebration. It occurred at the point of decision, where roads diverge. In Fuller's case, this ribbon announced that a party nominating convention in April 1902 would be the date of decision. We know that Fuller fought hard to have the convention in Plano, so for those in the know, this ribbon would signify one victory he had already won – Plano! Fuller's fans made and wore and looked at such emblems, to read the choice made by a particular person in a particular time and place.

Where do political ribbons come from as this grand vehicle of the self? The ribbon's signal attribute is colorful motion. In the English tradition, one might think of maypoles and other festive occasions. Military cockades used ribbons as a institutionalized group identifier. Words began being printed on ribbons in the very early 19th century and were used for political purposes almost immediately. The earliest example is from an 1800 ribbon celebrating a Napoleonic War victory with the legend "Peace."¹

Europe was able to print ribbons and other textiles with images clear enough to contain complex messages and even words by the middle of the 18th century, when copperplate printing technique was a well-developed practice. Technology and industry would take much longer to get to the point at which America could print timely political textiles itself. Until that time, the American market was a huge one for English textile manufacturers. Import of printed textiles expanded enormously following the Revolution. English industry created yard goods such as "The Apotheosis of Franklin." Americans wanted their own manufacturing, and the ability to produce printed fabrics. Ultimately, the mass production of textiles in the US is indebted to Samuel Slater, pictured in the center and dubbed "the father of American manufacturers." He was an Englishman who immigrated to America and founded a series of mills in New England beginning in 1787. At the same time, domestic printing on small textiles was becoming more common in a different industry – printers and publishers. In 1774, John Herson, a printer in Pennsylvania, offered patterns for printing handkerchiefs – mostly dots and squiggles, a little like a modern bandanna. The Lowell mills launched the American textile industry in the 1810s, and 1817 brought the earliest surviving names and dated American commemorative textile – a handkerchief for the Free Masons, covered in blockprinted Masonic symbols.²

The industrial and technological stage was set for the rise of mass-marketed political tools in cloth. Handkerchiefs and bandannas that related to public life in the new nation, are the earliest commemorative textiles made in the US. They helped popularize and reinforce symbols of an American culture, advancing the development of a common vocabulary for looking at the past and considering the future. They are part of creating a civic self in a pluralistic society. These ribbons tended to commemorate events or people in order to identify the owner with ideas or issues that were wrapped up in symbols like Washington or the Revolution or the Masons, not with political parties, which were

¹ Maurice Rickards. *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 274.

² Herbert Ridgeway Collins. *Threads of History: Americana Recorded on Cloth, 1775 to the Present* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), 1-2.

frowned upon in early America. Local printing made the prospect of local commemorative or otherwise civically oriented textiles more likely, at least in cities where a viable market for them existed.

The moment when images and symbols become common enough to be nationalized arrived in 1824, with a Frenchman. The Marquis de Lafayette was a guest of the nation during his extensive tour of America celebrating his role in the American Revolution. Americans indulged in a veritable orgy of honoring the Revolution through Lafayette. Images of Lafayette were printed on gloves, ribbons, and handkerchiefs. It was demonstrably a way for ordinary Americans to associate themselves with virtues and glory of a living icon of their civic religion, and thus to define themselves as part of a common tribe.³ Dedications and deaths were other early occasions for printed ribbons.

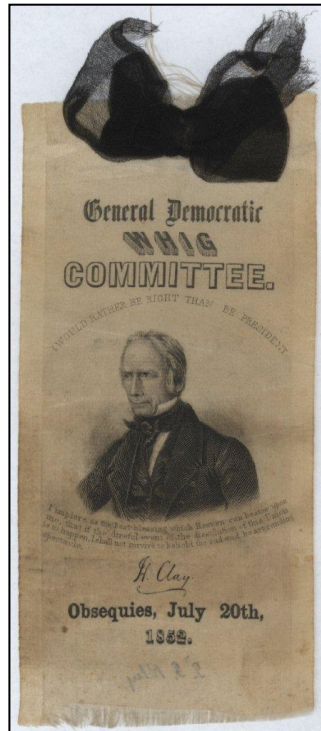


Figure 2. Henry Clay mourning ribbon, 1852, Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives.

The earliest ribbon in the House Collection was a commemorative one worn at a large public memorial exercise that followed former Speaker of the House Henry Clay's death (figure 2). It would have been pinned on the lapel, serving the same purpose as a black armband.

The ribbon as a communal marker lent itself to the tribal world of American politics. The introduction of material culture including textiles and ribbons, into politics began with a grudge match. After losing the 1824 presidential election to John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson prepared for revenge in 1828. He unleashed a campaign of vitriolic, raucous political warfare. He accused Adams of, among other crimes, procuring young American virgins for the Russian tsar. And Adams in turn accused Jackson of bigamy and multiple murders. The partisanship and deadly serious electioneering marked the first time candidates appealed to Americans directly and the first time parties had bits of material culture to

³ Stanley Izderda, Anne Loveland, Marc Miller. Lafayette, *Hero of Two Worlds: the art and pageantry of his farewell tour of America, 1824-1825* (Flushing, New York: Queens Museum, 1989), 109.

reinforce their message. Hundreds of varieties of manufactured trinkets were handed out to win and keep the attention of the voters – leaflets, jugs, bandannas and ribbons in dozens of different designs.⁴

Political ribbons started with Jackson and came into their own in the 1840 campaign of William Henry Harrison. The politics of popular entertainment reached maturity, with stories of log cabins and wartime exploits. Rallies three days long drew crowds of 100,000. A gathering that big was fertile ground for distributing objects such as ribbons, easy for the seller to bring and easy for the buyer to carry away. More than 150 designs survive from the Harrison campaign.⁵ This variety was possible only with a large national campaign. Congressional campaign memorabilia was still generations away.

Physically, where did all these ribbons come from? The scant evidence indicates they were manufactured primarily in the mid-Atlantic and New England. Almost all were lithographed designs in black. Most were white or cream silk. Who made them? Based on the tiny number on which makers were indicated, they appear to have been made by newspaper printers and book publishers. They were distributed primarily in cities and towns that had both manufacturing nearby and a large enough population to distinguish groups within it. Evidence for this exists in the ribbons themselves. It is also supported by comparing the presence of political ribbons in the Union and Confederacy during the Civil War. Ribbons like this one of Lincoln were common in the North. There are no surviving Confederate ribbons. They were simply not greatly available in the South.⁶ In the North, they were a luxury item but still cheap enough to be integrated into domestic culture.



Figure 4, left. Darius Hare campaign ribbon, 1892, Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives.
Figure 5, center. Samuel M. Clark campaign ribbon, 1894, Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives
Figure 6, right. Martin Gantz campaign ribbon, 1890-1892, Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives.

⁴ Roger A. Fischer. *Tippecanoe and Trinkets Too: The Material Culture of American Presidential Campaigns, 1828-1984* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 16-18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-35.

⁶ Diane L. Fagan Affleck and Paul Hudon. *Celebration and Remembrance: Commemorative Textiles in America, 1790-1990* (North Andover, Massachusetts: Museum of American Textile History, 1990), 75.

After the Civil War, ribbons became increasingly inexpensive, narrower in focus and more ephemeral in nature. They also moved to extremes of simplicity in design, possibly because they were so temporary, or perhaps because printers in smaller cities were less skilled. Ribbons from the House Collection are interesting examples of printing processes applied to the traditional campaign ribbon. The line block portrait image, possibly from a photograph in the case of Darius Hare, “The Winner,” (figure 4) and from a drawing or engraving in the cases of (figures 5 & 6) Clark and Gantz, is printed on the silk ribbon, along with the candidate’s name. Why the face on all three? Its prominence is partly retail politics and partly the American passion for individualism and personality.

In the post-bellum period, ribbons were used to reinforce a sense of shared purpose, just as political campaign bumpersticker are today. They were also part of group identity, something political parties depended on for effectiveness. [Peter Dooling ribbon and button, 1917, Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives] Political clubs and associations, like the Peter J. Dooling Association ribbon from the House Collection, worked hard to create an entire universe that embraced not only work and ideology, but also badges, rallies, torchlight parades, picnics, music, poetry, literature, and religion.⁷ The Peter J. Dooling Association was so notable that its events were accompanied by ribbons like this one, and were written up in the *New York Times* from 1882 through 1941. A 1907 article relates that the Association’s annual outing was a barge trip from Manhattan to College Point, where multiple baseball games were punctuated with “cold tea, circus lemonade, and frothy amber fluid.”⁸

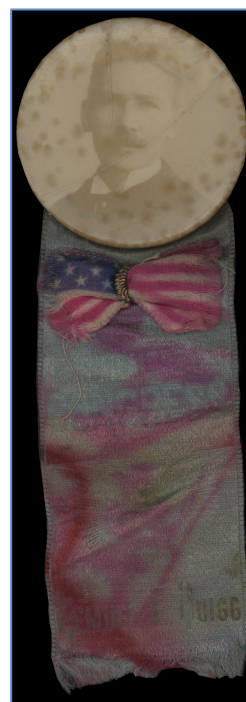
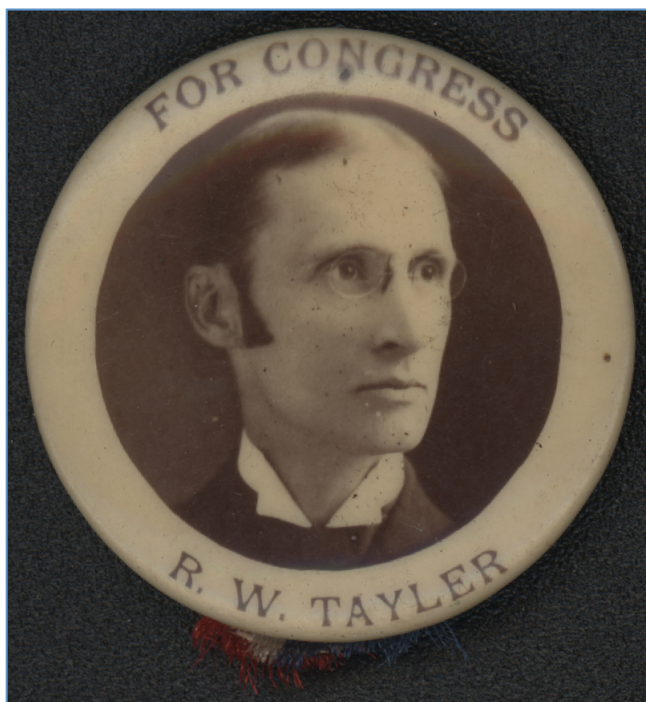


Figure 7, left. Robert W. Tayler campaign ribbon and button, 1898-1908, Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Figure 8, right. Lemuel Quigg campaign ribbon and button, 1896-1898, Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives.

⁷ Paul Martin. *The Trade Union Badge: Material Culture in Action*. (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2002), xviii.

⁸ “Busy Day for 2,000 Dooling Braves,” *New York Times* (July 15, 1907), n.p.

Suddenly, in the midst of political ribbons' success, they met their Waterloo, and were conquered by the celluloid button. In 1896, the Whitehead and Hoag Company gained patent rights to the button as we know it – paper under celluloid set in a metal holder and fastening device.⁹ Buttons immediately took off, for reasons made apparent in two button-ribbon combinations in the House Collection. Buttons allowed for sharper images and crisper printing and the use of photographs, and lasted longer than ribbons. Mr. Tayler's button was more durable than his now-vanished red-white-and-blue ribbon (figure 7.) Mr. Quigg's was more stain-resistant (figure 8.) As an added attraction to candidates, they were cheaper – less than a cent apiece wholesale. The ribbon's days were numbered.



Figure 9. Dalip Saund campaign ribbon, 1956, Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

For a while, ribbon-button combinations were popular, but they soon were relegated to ceremonial occasions such as whistle-stop appearances, where standing out in a crowd was important. Fringe and tassels were also popular additions. Ribbons didn't disappear altogether from American politics, but by the second quarter of the 20th century they had become exclusively specialty items. They were printed not for campaigns but for such functions as conventions and inaugurations. The House Collection contains several examples including one worn by a member of Dalip Saund's (figure 9) election committee at a 1956 party event. Conventions and meetings provided built solidarity by fostering the individual's identification with the larger group, which was reinforced by these identifying ribbons. Ribbons (and badges and pins) announced the wearer's affiliation and conveyed the individual's status within the group, much like military insignia.¹⁰

⁹ Mark Warda. *200 Years of Political Campaign Collectibles* (Clearwater, Florida: Galt Press, 2005) 10-12.

¹⁰ Roger A. Fischer and Edmund B. Sullivan. *American Political Ribbons and Ribbon Badges, 1825-1981* (Lincoln, Massachusetts: Quarterman Publications, Inc., 1985) 109.



Figure 10. 9/11 ribbon, 2001, collection of the U.S. House of Representatives.

The most recent ribbon in the House Collection, made and worn in the days following the attacks of September 11, 2001, was part of the re-emergence of ribbons (figure 10). In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, staffers in the House's Office of the Clerk began to make ribbons of red, white and blue. By the end of that September, thousands of them were being worn on Capitol Hill. After almost a century out of the limelight, they returned as a way of defining the public self at the turn of this century. The group Visual AIDS originated the practice of wearing a red ribbon, elegantly looped, in 1991.¹¹ It had the advantage of allowing people, particularly those in the public eye, to use it in a more symbolic and coded way than earlier printed political ribbons had. Oral histories conducted by the House of Representatives Historian reinforce the argument that physically manifesting a collective mind-set. One staffer said in an oral history that they set about making and wearing them in an almost therapeutic fashion to "give ourselves a sense of purpose" and to show that they were still there. And so, political ribbons in congressional history reappeared in a guise as new as the grassroots movements that spawned them, and as old as the desire to announce that one is both an individual actor and part of a larger endeavor, illustrating the motto that guides legislative action: *e pluribus unum* - out of many, one.

¹¹ Sarah Moore. *Ribbon Culture: Charity, Compassion, and Public Awareness*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 55.