

Cincinnati's Pendleton misplayed in 'Lincoln'



David Wolfford
LOCAL EXPERT

David Wolfford teaches government and politics at Mariemont High School. He can be reached at david@davidwolfford.com.

Steven Spielberg's new movie "Lincoln" reveals the president's push for the Thirteenth Amendment to abolish slavery. It also features Cincinnati Congressman George Pendleton (played by Peter McRobbie) as one of the chief adversaries of national emancipation. Critics and historians have praised the portrayal of Lincoln, but the film's image of Pendleton contradicts his genteel reputation and overlooks the thrust of his opposition to constitutional abolition in the House of Representatives.

George Hunt Pendleton won his first term in Congress in 1856. The *Enquirer*, then an influential party organ, called him a Democrat with "unblemished private character ... principle and conviction." He went on to win three more terms with a following of German and Irish Catholics, transplanted Southerners, and Jacksonian conservatives.

Democrats in Southwest Ohio felt abolitionist agitation had sparked secession. According to his biographer Thomas Mach, Pendleton loved the Union and wanted a peaceful end to the Civil War. He was also a conservative who believed in a strict construction of the Constitution. Like his party, he wanted "the Union as it was and the Constitution as it is."

After the amendment passed the Senate in mid-1864, Pendleton opposed it in



The historical George Pendleton was different from his film portrayal. ENQUIRER FILE

the House with an originalist's argument. He insisted the Framers would never have entered into this compact without slavery reserved as a state's power. His party delayed emancipation. Indeed, only four of Ohio's 19 congressmen, all Republicans, voted for it.

That summer, Democrats nominated Gen. George McClellan for president and

balanced the ticket with Pendleton, the Peace Democrat. Yet Lincoln won reelection and more Republicans rode his coattails back to Washington.

"Lincoln" picks up the story when Republicans reintroduce the proposal in January 1865, and we see Pendleton as a sinister and extreme enemy of freedom. Played by an actor nearly 30 years his senior, he warns of what might follow. "What will Negroes get next? The vote? Inter-marriage?" he asks in a dark voice. Such rhetoric is absent from Pendleton's comments in the *Congressional Globe*.

"The movie has made him as more villainous than he was," explains Professor Mach, "especially in the House chamber." He was called "Gentleman George" for his style, demeanor and reputation. Even the pro-Union newspapers found it difficult to censure Pendleton's character. He did campaign against intermarriage and black suffrage in 1862 in the second House debates, relying more on constitutional and military arguments. He felt the peculiar institution off limits and genuinely thought this measure would prevent the seceded states from returning to the Union.

Pendleton and most of Ohio's lame-duck Democrats again voted "nay," but the amendment passed by a mere two votes.

As the film suggests, heavy lobbying, patronage and some form of bribery may have tipped the vote. The *Enquirer* criticized the two Ohioans who opposed the amendment in June but remained absent from the House this time.

After the Civil War, Pendleton lost his next two elections. He returned to Washington as a senator in 1879 and fittingly sponsored the Civil Service Act that cracked down on party patronage and the spoils system.