

## Sidedoor: S11E04 – The Wide Awakes

**Lizzie Peabody:** Hey there, Sidedoorables. I wanted to let you know that this episode talks about the Republican and Democratic parties of the mid-1800s. Besides their names, these parties are entirely different from their modern day counterparts. So keep that in mind as you listen.

**Lizzie:** This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

### **Chapter I: A Midnight Awakening**

**Lizzie:** 1860. It's a cold February night as Eddie Yergason looks out the window of the fabric shop where he works. It's the end of a long day, measuring and cutting, fitting the people of Hartford, Connecticut for new clothes. It's calm inside, but as the 19-year-old tidies up by the light of an oil lamp, he notices a commotion brewing outside.

**Jon Grinspan:** *It's kind of bleary and blustery, and there's going to be this big rally for Cassius Clay across the street.*

**Lizzie:** This is Jon Grinspan, curator of political history at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. The headliner of this rally, Cassius Clay, was a Kentucky abolitionist known for firing up crowds with his speeches against slavery. And 1860 is an election year. Tensions are rising as political campaigns fuel divisions across America. And young Eddie watches as hundreds of people gather across the street to see Clay speak.

**Jon Grinspan:** *And Eddie knows that there's going to be a torch-lit rally afterwards to march Clay back to his hotel. And he wants in on this.*

**Lizzie:** But torches back then burned oil that could drip on you. And Eddie is a fashionable guy, known for wearing nice suits. He didn't want to get oil stains all over his clothes. So he gets crafty.

**Jon Grinspan:** *Eddie goes to the waterproof fabric part of the textile store and gets a length, you know, a yard and a half of fabric, cuts it into the shape of a cape, sews it a little cinch around its neck, and makes a shiny black makeshift cape.*

**Lizzie:** He emerges from the back of the shop draped in his new cape, and in my mind does a fancy little spin move to show it off to all his buddies.

**Jon Grinspan:** *And it looks pretty cool. So they all make one.*

**Lizzie:** Eddie and his four friends don their capes, grab their torches and run out into the street. So

when the hundreds of rallygoers empty out of the meeting hall, they see ...

**Jon Grinspan:** *These five guys standing in the middle of the street wearing black capes and holding long torches.*

**Lizzie:** The leaders of the march immediately grasped the power and symbolism of this—solidarity.

**Jon Grinspan:** *And so they put these five young kids at the head of this march back to the hotel.*

**Lizzie:** Eddie and his friends, who were basically crashing this demonstration, are now leading it, marching through the streets at midnight, a trail of torches snaking through the city behind them. Now at that time, these ant-slavery Northerners would have been Republicans. The Democratic Party was a mix of pro-slavery Southerners and Northerners.

**Jon Grinspan:** *And as often happens back then, Democrats living in the town who are kind of pro-slavery leaning attack the march.*

**Lizzie:** The Northern Democrats shout at the marchers. The Republicans shout back. Then there's some jostling, fists are thrown, and a full-on ruckus ensues, with Eddie and his friends—the apparent leaders of the march—the main targets of the fired-up Democrats.

**Jon Grinspan:** *And they try to steal torches from these guys marching with torches. And there's a scuffle and the Democrats are fought off.*

**Lizzie:** The marchers cheer Eddie and his friends. They don't know who these caped guys are, but they know they've seen something they like.

**Jon Grinspan:** *They've seen that Eddie Yergason and these young guys have designed this really powerful cape design, which seems to connect to the political moment. And they've seen also that these young guys are willing to fight.*

**Lizzie:** Following the march, a journalist from the Hartford Courant writes an article about Eddie and his friends, concluding: "Republicans Are Finally Wide Awake." Eddie's improvisation to keep torch oil off his nice clothes became the spark that ignited a mass movement.

**Jon Grinspan:** *And within a year it will have reformed American politics.*

**Lizzie:** This time on Sidedoor, we bring you the story of the Wide Awakes. They've been called "The most imposing, influential and potent political organization" in American history. So how does the story of the Wide Awakes end up in the dustbin of history? And why is now the right time to unearth their story? That's coming up, after the break.

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**Chapter II: "I have no objection to the liberty of speech, when the liberty of the cudgel is free to combat it." Alexander Stephens, future Vice President of the Confederacy.**

**Lizzie:** The American Civil War was the deadliest conflict in American history. It's estimated that as many as 750,000 people died in the war between the years of 1861 and 1865. That works out to more than 500 people a day for four years. Most historians agree that slavery was the central reason for the war, but there are some people today who say we didn't need to fight this bloody war to end slavery. That 600,000 deaths was too high of a cost for something that would have fizzled out on its own.

**Kevin Waite:** *But nobody who knew much about politics or the economy in 1860 would have seen things this way.*

**Lizzie:** This is Kevin Waite, an associate professor of history at Durham University, and author of the book *West of Slavery: The Southern Dream of a Transcontinental Empire*. He says that in 1860, at the exact time Eddie and his friends were fighting in the streets of Connecticut, four million African Americans were enslaved in the United States.

**Kevin Waite:** *The price of cotton had never been higher. The net worth of slaveholders had never been higher.*

**Lizzie:** Slavery in America was growing bigger and stronger every year. From the start of the 1800s to 1860, the number of enslaved people quadrupled from fewer than one million to roughly four million.

**Kevin Waite:** *The combined value of the four million enslaved people in the South was worth more than the value of all the railroads, all the factories and all the banks in the country combined.*

**Lizzie:** And all this economic power was concentrated into the hands of Southern slaveowners, who only made up two percent of the entire American population.

**Jon Grinspan:** *Most people don't live in a place with slavery, most people don't support slavery, and yet those people who do have built up this slave power, this political power, this economic power that is making demands on everyone else in American society.*

**Lizzie:** The Smithsonian's Jon Grinspan again. He says most of America's population in 1860 was in Northern free states. Still, Southern states ruled not only the economy but Congress, too. And the reason for this was the Constitution's three-fifths clause.

**Jon Grinspan:** *Which gives three-fifths of a vote from enslaved people to basically white representatives in their districts. Some people say that the three-fifths compromise counted African*

*Americans as three-fifths of a person. It counted African Americans as zero-fifths of a person, but it counted them as three-fifths of an additional vote for each slaveholding state.*

**Lizzie:** The Southern slave powers used their outsized political influence to impose pro-slavery laws in Congress. Leading into the 1860 election, they were working toward expanding slavery westward into new states, reopening the international slave trade, and they'd recently passed a new version of the Fugitive Slave Act. And this basically said that even if an enslaved person escaped to a free state in the North, that state was legally obligated to return that person to bondage.

**Kevin Waite:** *Which meant that sure, there were technically free states, but there was really nowhere in the United States where an enslaved person was truly free.*

**Lizzie:** The Southern slave powers of the time also used political power and violence to silence the discussion of slavery across America. President Andrew Jackson, a Southerner from Tennessee, banned the US Postal Service from delivering abolitionist publications.

**Kevin Waite:** *There was virtually no public anti-slavery discussion in the South for about 30 years leading up to the Civil War.*

**Lizzie:** And speaking against slavery meant putting your life at risk.

**Kevin Waite:** *It just was not safe to openly air anti-slavery views in a slave state at the time. And frankly, it wasn't safe to air anti-slavery views in a free state either.*

**Lizzie:** I know it might be hard to imagine a time when angry mobs policed your language, but bear with me and picture New York City in the mid 1800s. Even there, if someone were to put up a soapbox, stand on top of it and start stating anti-slavery views ...

**Kevin Waite:** *They could be pelted with rotten food. They were pulled from their speaking platforms, they were bludgeoned by pro-slavery mobs.*

**Jon Grinspan:** *So there's this growing sense that not only does a conspiracy of slavery dominate the American government, but that you can't even stand on a street corner and say what you want. And this is what motivates people to lean into movements like the Wide Awakes.*

**Lizzie:** Following the Cassius Clay street brawl in February of 1860, Eddie Yergason and his friends realized they had lightning in a bottle.

**Jon Grinspan:** *They get together a week later in one of the guy's apartments, and they say, "Let's take this cape and let's make a uniform."*

**Lizzie:** This is Eddie describing the uniform in a letter to his mother.

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*"Each of the joins has to have a rig like the rest. It is a black oil cape cloth to go over the shoulders, a shiny black cap and torch, all alike."*

**Lizzie:** He emphasizes the need for uniformity in the phrase "all alike." And the guys were like, "Cool, we have a uniform. Now all we need is a really cool name." There were political clubs at the time with names like "The Young Men's Republican Club." But that was too stuffy for a group that wasn't afraid to brawl in the streets. On the other end of the spectrum, there were street gangs with names like "The Dead Rabbits" or "The Blood Tubs." Which I guess refers to a tub of blood? Anyway, that was a little too far in the opposite direction. They needed a name that said they were fighters, but they were fighting for a purpose.

**Lizzie:** And then someone in the group pointed out the newspaper article that had come out the night of the Cassius Clay rally. The one that said Republicans were finally wide awake. And the group was like, "Yeah, that is a perfect name: The Wide Awakes."

**Jon Grinspan:** *Wide awake works a little bit like woke today, but not quite. It means someone who's finally aware, whose eyes are open, who's no longer sleeping through the world and is standing up for themselves. And so in that cultural milieu with Wide Awake as the name, they're saying we're finally standing up against slavery.*

**Lizzie:** They had a name. They had a look. And they had a very simple political stance: protect anti-slavery speakers from angry mobs.

**Jon Grinspan:** *They have a simple goal: you march, you escort speakers, you defend free speech.*

**Lizzie:** And it caught on like gangbusters! Wide Awake chapters pop up all over Connecticut, and then start spreading to nearby states.

**Jon Grinspan:** *And starts to become kind of a regional New England thing. And then in May, 1860, The Republican National Convention is going to be in Chicago.*

**Lizzie:** Young men in Chicago hear about these Connecticut Yankees donning capes and fighting Democrats in the streets. And they say, "Republicans from all over America are coming to Chicago for the convention. Let's show them how we roll."

**Jon Grinspan:** *So they start organizing wide awake companies in Chicago, so that by the time the convention happens in May, they can have thousands of Wide Awakes in the streets.*

**Lizzie:** New chapters of the Wide Awakes pop up all around Chicago—uniformed men marching in columns toward the convention.

**Chapter III: "Politics has always been the systematic organization of hatreds." - Henry Adams, historian and descendant of President John Adams**

**Lizzie:** What Henry Adams meant by "systematic organization of hatreds" is that every successful political alliance was brought together by their shared hatred of someone else. In the 1840s and '50s, Democrats ran away with election after election because of their shared hatred of anti-slavery Republicans. It was a strong coalition. Northern Republicans, on the other hand, could rarely pull together to defeat the Democrats. They were too busy fighting with themselves. Here's a rundown of the Republican Party in the late 1850s.

**Jon Grinspan:** *Some people are abolitionists and want to get rid of slavery tomorrow. That's a real small minority. There are others who want to end the expansion of slavery, but think abolition is going to break up the union, and they don't get along with abolitionists.*

**Lizzie:** Some Republicans were recent immigrants who'd brought anti-slavery views with them to America.

**Jon Grinspan:** *But then there are other people who are really strong anti-immigrants, who can't be in the same political organization they think as recent immigrants.*

**Lizzie:** You also had formerly enslaved people and fugitive slaves.

**Jon Grinspan:** *But they're trying to work with these political organizations in the North that are run by white people who are openly racist.*

**Lizzie:** A mixed bag is putting it very mildly. And so in May of 1860, all these factions descended on Chicago for the Republican National Convention. Vastly different political clans from places like California, Illinois, Connecticut and Pennsylvania arrive in the Windy City, and the first thing they see are young men marching in the streets in matching capes and hats—hundreds of them.

**Lizzie:** And these Republicans wonder, "What do these young men want?" To which someone would say "They're just here to keep the pro-slavery mobs off our backs." And that's something everyone in the Republican Party could get behind. They realize, "I may not like you, Thaddeus, but there's someone I hate even more than you: those Democrats who threw a tomato at Herschel last week."

**Jon Grinspan:** *And so they're winning over people who we would, in some ways, find objectionable because they're showing them that there's a bigger enemy to worry about.*

**Lizzie:** The Slave powers. The Wide Awakes had become a uniting force within a divided party. During the Chicago convention, Republicans nominated Abraham Lincoln to be their presidential candidate. And afterwards, Wide Awake chapters spring up all over the American north and Midwest.

**Jon Grinspan:** *It's a hugely diverse movement. There are African-American Wide Awakes, there are white Wide Awakes, there are conservative and radical Wide Awakes, there are immigrants and xenophobic nativists.*

**Lizzie:** Wide Awakes begin marching all over America, gaining a reputation as the political police of the Republican Party, defenders of anti-slavery speech, bodyguards to the prominent abolitionists and politicians. Jon says you'd never see a Wide Awake alone.

**Jon Grinspan:** *First, you probably hear them on the cobblestones because people were hard-soled boots back then, and you'd hear hundreds of feet marching. And then you'd probably smell them because they marched with these oil torches, so you'd smell the stink of these torches. And then you'd see these guys organized in a really orderly column, wearing these shiny reflective capes, holding a torch on a long staff, like a six-foot staff. Usually they march in silence.*

**Lizzie:** In fact, one of the first politicians to experience a Wide Awakes escort was Abraham Lincoln. This was shortly after the Cassius Clay rally back in Hartford, before he became the presidential nominee of the Republican Party.

**Jon Grinspan:** *He's a third-, fourth-tier political figure. I mean, he's beginning to be nationally known, but he's a one-term congressman from Illinois. He's not particularly prominent.*

**Lizzie:** Lincoln was campaigning to become the Republican presidential candidate when he stopped in Hartford. There, he gives a speech against the expansion of slavery into new territories. And when he comes out of the convention hall ...

**Jon Grinspan:** *He goes out into the night. He gets into a carriage with the mayor of Hartford. And these guys kind of appear out of the crowd—several dozen members in uniforms, in caps, with torches. They march them through Hartford to the Allen House Hotel. It seems like a striking scene to me. One would assume it made an impression on him, but we can't say from the record what he thought of it.*

**Lizzie:** Lincoln never said how he felt about the Wide Awakes. But later that year, when he became the presidential candidate, the political tensions in America started to really heat up, regularly boiling over into violent brawls, stabbings and shootings. The Wide Awakes told Lincoln they could protect him, which put him in a bind. Would this political paramilitary force be an asset to him—or a liability? We'll have more on that after the break.

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**Chapter IV: "Elections belong to the people. If they decide to turn their back on the fire and burn their behinds, then they will just have to sit on their blisters." - Presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln.**

**Lizzie:** The election of 1860 was basically about one question ...

**Kevin Waite:** *How far should slavery be able to expand into the West?*

**Lizzie:** Historian Kevin Waite again. In 1860, America was growing, adding states and territories all the time. And with every new state and territory came the same question: should slavery be allowed there? Democrats said yes, But Lincoln ...

**Kevin Waite:** *Drew a line on the map and said that slavery shouldn't be allowed into any territories of the West.*

**Lizzie:** Lincoln wasn't calling for the abolition of slavery. He wanted to stop its expansion. That's it. And this moderate stance appealed to a coalition of working-class voters that mirrored the people who made up the Wide Awakes.

**Jon Grinspan:** *He's a really good choice for them. Because he's young, because he's from a laboring background, because he's not all that well known or well connected, he really connects with their youth, their grassroots model, their kind of anti-establishment politics.*

**Lizzie:** So the Wide Awakes throw their full support behind Lincoln heading into the fall election.

**Jon Grinspan:** *They send letters to him saying he's an honorary Wide Awake. They show up at his house and start demanding speeches, and ultimately, they offer to become a fighting force for him.*

**Lizzie:** Lincoln might have been happy to have the support of the Wide Awakes, but he was smart enough to know that this support would come with baggage. With the election nearing, the number of Wide Awakes keeps growing. But their reputation grows even more.

**Jon Grinspan:** *Americans believe they're 500,000 wide awakes in a nation of 31 million people. That number's probably not right, but it's what people believe, and it kind of is what lives in people's heads.*

**Lizzie:** Newspapers across the South publish stories about this growing army of caped Republicans in the North. They paint the Wide Awakes as a militia preparing to take the election by force and invade the South. And Southern politicians use this fear to their political advantage.

**Jon Grinspan:** *And you have elected politicians and prominent editors telling people in the South, the Wide Awakes are gonna come to kill you.*

**Lizzie:** This fuels the rise of anti-Wide Awake militant groups in the South.

**Jon Grinspan:** *So they start lighting torches, they start marching with uniforms. And as the fall begins,*



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*the violence begins to really increase, too. There are all these prominent conflicts, brawls, shootings between Wide Awakes and Democrats around the country.*

**Lizzie:** And when it seems like America is ready to tear itself apart, election day of 1860 finally comes. That November, Abraham Lincoln wins a four-way race to become the 16th president of the United States.

**Jon Grinspan:** *He wins 39 percent of the popular vote. So more people don't want Lincoln to be president than do, but he wins 59 percent of the electoral vote.*

**Lizzie:** Jon says we can't say that the Wide Awakes are the reason Lincoln won, but ...

**Jon Grinspan:** *We do know that Lincoln's edge came from young people in the lower North and lower Northwest. So people in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, California, who previously had not been able to line up with the Republican Party, Lincoln gets them. And we know also those were areas of incredible Wide Awake strength.*

**Lizzie:** Newspapers also declare the election a Wide Awake victory.

**Jon Grinspan:** *The most prominent Republican newspaper, the New York Tribune, says the Wide Awakes are the reason Lincoln won.*

**Lizzie:** And this was not appreciated by Southern Democrats.

**Jon Grinspan:** *A lot of them point to the Wide Awakes and say, "We just had an election that was won by a militaristic, partisan, paramilitary Republican force in the North. You think they're going away? They're taking control of the country, and they're gonna win patronage and they're gonna start to control Southern states as well.*

**Lizzie:** Southern politicians and newspapers point to the Wide Awakes as proof that the North had broken the tenuous peace that held the union together. They said Southerners needed to arm themselves to protect against an imminent invasion.

**Jon Grinspan:** *The former governor of Virginia, Henry Wise, who's a prominent politician, says the Wide Awakes are coming to slit our throat. They're going to invade Norfolk by sea. They're going to march south. They're going to provoke a race war. Really specific, heated, hysterical, false claims that gin up fear.*

**Lizzie:** Of course, that didn't happen. But in late December, South Carolina seceded from the Union,

and before Lincoln took the oath of office in March, six more states had left to form the Confederate States of America. Rumors swirl about various assassination plots before Lincoln can even take office. Many people believe he won't survive the inauguration. Wide Awakes write to Lincoln and say ...

**Jon Grinspan:** *We could have a thousand, we could have ten thousand. We can come with our uniforms, we can come in plain clothes. We can bring weapons, we can not. But we can be your army to defend you.*

**Lizzie:** This was a real dilemma for Lincoln. His life was at stake, but so was the country. If he rode into Washington surrounded by armed civilians in capes, any hopes he had of preserving the Union would be over. So he takes the risk. He tells the Wide Awakes ...

**Jon Grinspan:** *Don't march to Washington. Don't come hanging around in uniforms. Because Lincoln knows that the majority of the country is still in the balance. That kind of middle, especially in the border states, Kentucky, Missouri, Virginia, are still debating whether to secede or not. And Northern Democrats, too. And Lincoln knows he needs as many people to support the Union as possible.*

**Lizzie:** Without the protection of the Wide Awakes, Lincoln makes it to Washington unharmed. In his inaugural speech, he appeals to those middle states to embrace the Union.

**[VOICE ACTOR, Abraham Lincoln:** *The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to "preserve, protect, and defend it."*]

**Lizzie:** Lincoln finished his speech and began the walk from the US Capitol to the White House. Reporters on the scene said as he moved through the crowd, they saw person after person ...

**Jon Grinspan:** *Start taking out Wide Awake hats and putting it on, and little Wide Awake badges.*

**Lizzie:** The Wide Awakes hadn't listened. They were at the inauguration the whole time—in secret.

**Chapter V: "It was the crossroads of our being—and it was a hell of a crossroads." Shelby Foote. A Civil War Historian.**

**Lizzie:** A month after Lincoln's inauguration, Confederate troops attacked Fort Sumter in South Carolina, and this officially started the Civil War. But the first casualties happened on the streets of Baltimore weeks later when an anti-Wide Awake group attacked soldiers traveling from Massachusetts to Washington, DC, to defend the Capital.

**Jon Grinspan:** *People are beaten to death. Troops are firing into crowds of angry civilians. And a lot of these civilians are—had been riled up and organized originally to fight Wide Awakes. Everywhere there's this bloodshed starting. It happens not with cannons and forts, but in the street with Americans killing Americans, and it happens with the Wide Awakes kind of front and center.*

**Lizzie:** A little over a year after 19-year-old Eddie Yergason sewed his cape in Hartford, Connecticut, the Civil War is growing out of control. And the group Eddie started, the Wide Awake, is at the center of it. They sign up en-masse to fight for the Union Army.

**Jon Grinspan:** *Whole companies will go to the recruiting office to sign up together. Captains of Wide Awakes will become captains of companies.*

**Lizzie:** Eddie Yergason enlists as well. And what happens next is well-known history. After a bloody, drawn-out conflict, Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrenders his army in the Spring of 1865, ending the war. Later that year, the 13th Amendment abolishes slavery in America. Afterward, the country begins the long and bitter period of Reconstruction and reunion. An era Mark Twain dubbed "The Gilded Age."

**Jon Grinspan:** *Think about the presidents in Gilded Age America.*

**Lizzie:** Ulysses S. Grant. James Garfield. Rutherford B. Hayes.

**Jon Grinspan:** *It's Republican Union Army veterans from New York, from Ohio. Guys with beards who fought at Antietam.*

**Lizzie:** Jon says a lot of these Gilded Age presidents were Wide Awakes, as were many of the people who led America after the war.

**Jon Grinspan:** *Cabinet members, congressmen, senators, governors, bank presidents, railroad company presidents, a lot of the people who inherit Gilded Age America, and run Reconstruction, run the Gilded Age, are these kind of Yankee Union veterans who were Wide Awakes first, fought in the war, and dominate American society afterwards.*

**Chapter VI: "Go to the place where you belong from now on: the dustbin of history!" - Leon Trotsky, Russian political theorist.**

**Lizzie:** With Wide Awakes playing such an important role in the second half of the 19th century, it makes sense to wonder, "Why have I never heard of them?" I mean there's no shortage of historical evidence.

**Jon Grinspan:** *When you go digging, you find more than you can possibly use of newspapers, diaries, letters, but they're not well known today and they weren't particularly taught in the 20th century.*

**Lizzie:** Jon says that's because the Wide Awake story was not an easy one to tell.

**Jon Grinspan:** *Especially as Americans are starting to think about how to have reunion, get along, get past the conflict, it really feels like dredging up some of America's darkest history.*

**Lizzie:** People wanted to look forward, toward hope and reconciliation not back at the chaos and violence that devolved into the Civil War.

**Jon Grinspan:** *And so it's been easier to love Lincoln and talk about Honest Abe, and really make him the martyr that he legitimately is, than to talk about the people who campaigned for him and got him into office. I think he's just an easier story to tell than the Wide Awakes.*

**Lizzie:** So the story of the Wide Awakes never got much traction outside historical circles.

**Jon Grinspan:** *When I started studying them in 2007, what I thought was interesting was that they were so irrelevant in a way, so obscure, a story people didn't know. It felt like this kind of like, little splinter of the past that we just hadn't engaged with, and was really different from the world we lived in and the democracy we lived in.*

**Lizzie:** Jon says back in 2007, he couldn't fully understand a time of violent political mobs and extreme partisan polarization that felt so far from his experience of American politics. But since he started studying the Wide Awakes, a lot has changed. In 2017, Jon got a call.

**Jon Grinspan:** *A tiny little historical society in Milford, New Hampshire, went up in their attic kind of digging through the rafters and found this box. And they took down the box and they opened it up and they found a giant Wide Awake cape. It had an open eye on it, which was a Wide Awake symbol. It said 1860, Wide Awake, and it was accompanied with a torch on a long staff.*

**Lizzie:** The curator who found the cape and torch said Jon started trembling when he realized these were authentic Wide Awake artifacts.

**Jon Grinspan:** *To us, it was like finding dinosaur bones. It's like an artifact from a forgotten time that helps us make sense of it.*

**Lizzie:** A Wide Awake cape and torch in good condition? He brought them both to the Smithsonian to join the collection. But that wasn't the only torch Jon would collect that year.

**[NEWS CLIP:** *[chanting] Blood and soil!*

**[NEWS CLIP:** *We begin tonight with that breaking news. A horrific scene in Charlottesville, Virginia.]*

**[NEWS CLIP:** *Hundreds of white nationalists and alt-right activists clashed in the streets with counter-protesters and police.]*

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*[NEWS CLIP: Hundreds of marchers carried torches, and chanted before fights broke out near a statue of Thomas Jefferson.]*

**Lizzie:** In the summer of 2017, white supremacists marched down the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, carrying torches and chanting racist slogans.

**Jon Grinspan:** *I had friends who were counter-protesters at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, and we collected a tiki torch from them, we collected riot shields. We collected a large number of objects for the Smithsonian. And it's really, I'd say challenging, to look at the Wide Awake torch I mentioned and look at the tiki torch next to each other.*

**Lizzie:** Now the Wide Awakes and the Unite the Right are two very different political groups made up of people with very different agendas. But still, Jon says he's taken aback every time he sees the Wide Awakes torch next to the Unite the Right torch.

**Jon Grinspan:** *One seems inspiring, right? The Wide Awakes are marching against slavery. Finally, a mass movement is standing up. The tiki torch is menacing, clearly, I think to most of us. And yet they seem like they're pretty similar objects, and they're kind of communicating with each other.*

**Lizzie:** Jon says this communication is how we understand history. Today's political divisions and tensions help us relate to and understand the time of the Wide Awakes. And that opens us up to be able to learn from this time period.

**Jon Grinspan:** *A lot of us were taught an overly precious version of American history that was all about liberty and freedom and everything getting better, and so when there's political discord, divisiveness, even violence, it looks really foreign to what we were taught and it looks like the end of the world.*

**Lizzie:** Jon says this can make it feel today's political divisions are unique—and signal the end of America. But he says if you really look at American history, you can see that we've been in bad places before—I mean, really bad! And we've come out the other side.

**Jon Grinspan:** *I think the Wide Awakes are a good training in understanding that our histories can be ugly, can be creepy, can be really consequential. And none of it is apocalyptic, and none of it is perfect. And the Wide Awakes are a really good way to tell a story that is, you know, eight-ninths admirable and one-ninth terrifying, right? And that's often how history looks.*

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**Lizzie:** You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. To

learn more about the Wide Awakes, check out our newsletter. We'll include all sorts of photos and primary documents. Plus, we'll share a link to Jon's book, *Wide Awake: The Forgotten Force That Elected Lincoln and Spurred the Civil War*. And Kevin Waite's book, *West of Slavery: The Southern Dream of a Transcontinental Empire*. You can subscribe to the newsletter at [Sl.edu/Sidedoor](http://Sl.edu/Sidedoor). And if you're in the DC area, you can see an authentic Wide Awakes torch at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

**Lizzie:** For help with this episode, we want to thank Jon Grinspan and Kevin Waite. Thanks also to Tom Peabody and Sharon Bryant for additional voices in this episode.

**Lizzie:** Our podcast is produced by James Morrison, and me, Lizzie Peabody. Our associate producer is Nathalie Boyd. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant. Mimi Plato writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Transcripts are by Russell Gragg. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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**Lizzie:** I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

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**Jon Grinspan:** *The amazing thing about Eddie Yergeson is so he designs the Wide Awakes, he survives the war, and he goes on to become America's most prominent designer and interior decorator at a time when people are really excited about that kind of—I mean, think about, like, the kind of sumptuous Victorian mansions and rooms. He helps design a lot of them, and ultimately he decorates the White House.*