## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bigger than Little Bighorn</td>
<td>Nomenclature, Memory, and the Greatest Native American Victory over the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Michael F. Conlin and Robert M. Owens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>The Dilemma of Dissent</td>
<td>Kentucky's Whigs and the Mexican War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Joseph W. Pearson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>The Battle for the Border State Soul</td>
<td>The Slavery Debate in the Churches of the Border Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>John R. McKivigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>Collections Essay</td>
<td>“United We Stand—Divided We Fall”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Filson’s Civil War Exhibit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>James J. Holmberg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77</td>
<td>Review Essay</td>
<td>“Heaven is a Kentuck of a Place” Exceptionism in the Historiography of Early Kentucky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Craig Thompson Friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>Book Reviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96</td>
<td>Announcements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ON THE COVER:

FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Bigger than Little Bighorn

*Nomenclature, Memory, and the Greatest Native American Victory over the United States*

Michael F. Conlin and Robert M. Owens

Two important Native American victories over the United States Army, including the greatest in history, have been unduly ignored. The common names given to the two battles won by the Northwestern Confederation over the United States—“Harmar’s Defeat” (October 21-22, 1790) with over two hundred American casualties, including 183 killed, and “St. Clair’s Defeat” (November 4, 1791) with over nine hundred American casualties, including six hundred thirty killed—completely ignore the victors. Indeed, this nomenclature is every bit as one-sided as calling the Battle of the Little Bighorn (June 25, 1876) “Custer’s Last Stand.” Academic historians, schoolteachers, and the general public have largely overlooked these two battles due to their ethnocentric names and the triumphalism of American public memory, especially in regard to the Indian Wars. More neutral names for the battles promise to rescue them from the dustbin of history and restore them to their rightful place in the textbooks, classrooms, and collective consciousness of the people of the United States. In the interest of accuracy and fairness, these confrontations deserve appropriate names. Rather than name the battles after the defeated (or the victors), historians should employ objective geographic labels in the spirit of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Accordingly, “Harmar’s Defeat” should be called the “Battle of Kekionga,” and “St. Clair’s Defeat” the “Battle of the Wabash Forks.”

To some extent, these two battles were part of the unresolved frontier phase of the Revolutionary War. While the Patriots’ conflict with the British ended in 1783, armed conflict with Native Americans in the Northwest Territory continued intermittently until 1815. Historian Colin Calloway has accurately described the Treaty of Paris as the “peace that brought no peace.” The driving force behind the conflict was white encroachment on Indian lands, which provoked Native American attacks and Euro-American reprisals. The British encouraged and supported American Indian resistance to white American expansion into the Northwest Territory. Instability in that region was one of the most pressing issues facing the newly independent nation. To remedy its weaknesses there and in many other areas, the new American republic adopted the federal Constitution in 1788,
establishing a powerful central government. In the 1790s, the federal government in Philadelphia could levy taxes and raise an army. As the Constitution’s Preamble notes, the federal government could now “provide for the common defense” and thus project military power hundreds of miles into the North American interior.¹

These two battles were both part of the messy end of the Revolutionary War and of the imperial project of the United States, a nation of nearly four million people, to conquer and dispossess the First Peoples of the eastern woodlands, who numbered about one hundred and fifty thousand, with perhaps a third of them living north of the Ohio River. Even after the Treaty of Paris secured American independence and ended direct Anglo-American conflict, the United States government rightly regarded the Northwestern Native Americans as a strategic threat. They had fought with the British in the Revolutionary War, continued to accept aid from British agents in the 1780s and 1790s, and many would take the British side in the War of 1812. More important, the United States government viewed the Northwestern Native Americans as an obstacle to white colonization and exploitation of the Northwestern frontier.

To counter the threat and clear the barrier, President George Washington charged the War Department with negotiating Indian treaties in the Northwest Territory to secure title to their land and enable white settlement. Many of the First Peoples refused to acquiesce to the presidential diktat. A loose alliance of Native Americans, including the Shawnee, Miami, Delaware, Wyandot, Ottawa, and Potawatomi nations, repudiated the Treaty of Fort Harmar (1789), which would have removed them from much of what would become southern Ohio. To resist the invasion of their land north of the Ohio River, they formed the Northwestern Confederation; many, though certainly not all, the American Indians living in the region joined this confederacy. Secretary of War Henry Knox directed General Josiah Harmar, a veteran of the Revolutionary War, to crush Indian resistance in the Northwest Territory.²

Washington hoped to avoid a fight if possible, writing that war “ought to be avoided with all means consistent with the security of the frontier inhabitants, the security of the troops, and the national dignity.” Yet if the Native American confederacy continued to make war, he allowed that United States forces would “be constrained to punish them with severity.” By the summer of 1790, both Harmar and Arthur St. Clair, governor of the Northwest Territory—Washington stipulated that both must concur in making an attack—had decided to go on the offensive. Their action was, in the broadest sense, authorized by the president and the secretary of war, who acquiesced to the discretion of their officers on a distant
frontier. Yet the decision considerably exceeded Knox’s instructions, which did not mention the Northwestern Confederation, but only a small group of troublesome Shawnee, a “banditti” whom Harmar was directed to “extirpate.”

On September 26, 1790, Harmar’s army began a march that led three hundred twenty regulars and some eleven hundred ill-trained and undisciplined militiamen from Cincinnati deep into Indian country, near what is now Fort Wayne, Indiana. Harmar’s men razed five Miami towns and destroyed some twenty thousand bushels of corn, but they did not precipitate the pitched battle their commander sought. Instead, in two separate incidents on October 21 and 22, 1790, the Confederation’s warriors ambushed detachments of Harmar’s army, routing and repelling the invaders. The war leaders in these actions included Blue Jacket, principal war chief of the Shawnee, and Little Turtle of the Miami. Particularly troubling for the United States was the raw militia’s tendency to flee, leaving the regulars to take heavy casualties. The government’s pound-foolish reliance on militia, Harmar’s decision to divide his forces, and the army’s inexplicable contempt for American Indian military prowess crippled the expedition. While initial reports spoke of the “entire success” of the campaign, in fact Harmar had lost 183 men killed and inflicted few casualties on the Native Americans. The results could easily have been worse for Harmar’s men. Blue Jacket had planned to destroy the entire army, but could not when many of his warriors left, regarding a lunar eclipse as an ill omen. Nonetheless, Harmar, at his own request, received a court martial examination, and, though cleared of any wrongdoing, promptly resigned his commission. On March 4, 1791, Washington appointed St. Clair, another Revolutionary War veteran, as major general in the army to replace Harmar.

In a classic case of blowback, Harmar’s invasion emboldened Native American resistance. Blue Jacket, about three weeks after his victory over Harmar, addressed the British at Detroit, asserting: “We as a people have made no war, but as a people we are determined to meet…an enemy who came…with a premeditated design to root us out of our land.” Flushed with military success and cheered by their British sponsors, American Indians raided white settlements along the Ohio River in Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Virginia in the winter of 1790-1791. The president ordered St. Clair to impose a Carthaginian peace on the increasingly confident Native American confederacy. The general also received an emphatic warning from the old Indian fighter-turned-president: “General St. Clair, in three words, beware of surprise; trust not the Indian; leave not your arms for the moment; and when you halt for the night be sure to fortify your camp—again and again, General, beware of surprise!” But St. Clair ignored Washington’s advice and repeated most of Harmar’s mistakes. As the war secretary would later conclude, the “principal causes of the failure of the expedition appear to be as follows: 1st. The deficient number of good troops.…2d. Their want of sufficient discipline, according to the nature of the service. 3d. The lateness of the season.” But Knox
missed St. Clair’s greatest blunder: the general underestimated the strength, initiative, and resolve of the Northwestern Confederation. St. Clair never considered the possibility that the Native Americans might attack him before he chose to attack.5

In the spring of 1791, St. Clair had gushed with enthusiasm, boasting that he would crush the Native Americans and that afterward “ruin will surely overtake them.” His over-confidence proved even more disastrous than General George A. Custer’s eighty-five years later. While Kentucky militia continued to raid the towns of the First Peoples with mixed success that summer, delays in recruiting and supply kept St. Clair’s army from taking the field until October 4, 1791. His men did not approach their objective until November 1791, long after most late-eighteenth century armies took to winter camp. St. Clair’s force was so undisciplined that many militiamen deserted and so underfed that the deserters menaced the supply lines. To counter that threat, St. Clair divided his army, sending a body of regulars to guard his pack trains. He would sorely miss those men. Desertions, exertions, and excursions further reduced St. Clair’s army, once numbering twenty-six hundred men, to just fourteen hundred, many of whom possessed neither good health nor high morale. On November 3, 1791, they encamped along the forks of the upper Wabash River, near modern Fort Recovery, Ohio. The soldiers were too tired to fortify their camp, and St. Clair did not order them to do so. Anticipating Custer’s arrogance, St. Clair maintained that Native Americans would not dare stand and fight against regular troops and ignored his scouts’ warnings of American Indian sightings. Meanwhile, Indian scouts provided Blue Jacket and Little Turtle with accurate intelligence regarding the position of the invaders. The Confederation’s warriors, numbering some twelve hundred, were in high spirits and eager to fight. As British Indian agent Simon Girty reported, “The Indians were never in greater heart to meet their enemy, nor more sure of success. They were determined to drive them off the Ohio [River].” They also enjoyed the decisive leadership of Blue Jacket.6

On November 4, the Confederation’s warriors surrounded St. Clair’s soldiers. Just before dawn, they attacked. Pandemonium swept the camp. Fat and gout-ridden, St. Clair’s courage failed to mitigate his incompetence. Although he made himself a perfect target riding about trying to rally his panic-stricken men, he somehow escaped the ensuing carnage unscathed. Most of his men had no
such luck. Initially content to shoot from cover into the disorganized army, the American Indians eventually rushed in with clubs, tomahawks, and knives. With his army routed, St. Clair reluctantly ordered a retreat, but by then much of his surviving force had anticipated the outcome and fled.7

Writing shortly after the battle, Michael McDonough, a lieutenant with the 2nd U.S. Regiment, bitterly observed that “a great number of my acquaintance[s] & friends have lately changed their place of abode. And that without the hair of their heads.” St. Clair’s force reportedly killed twenty-one Native Americans and wounded forty, while suffering over nine hundred casualties, including six hundred thirty dead. This gruesome tally did not include the hundred or so of the army’s women camp followers whom, historian Robert Gunderson notes, “found themselves special objects of torture.” Moreover, the army lost most of its equipment. Samuel McDowell, a Revolutionary War veteran and concerned Kentucky resident, ticked off their losses: “Eight Peaces of Brass Cannon[,] 150 Beaves [beef cows], 20,000 Pounds of flower [sic], above 1000 Stand of Arms, with their Military Chest Containing above Six thousand Pounds in Cash; with all their Camp Equepage, officer Baggage, Medison[,] Cheests &c.” Fortunately for the fleeing army, the rich spoils and the glut of war trophies distracted the warriors, who made only a brief and half-hearted pursuit.8

The United States’ loss and the Native Americans’ gain reverberated far beyond the battlefield. It frightened white Americans in the West and demoralized those in the East. It was, as one Kentuckian concluded, “an Alarming affair” to Bluegrass settlers. Word of St. Clair’s defeat made all of Virginia “miserable,” Governor Henry Lee admitted. In addition to the blood spilled and treasure squandered, the Confederation’s second victory seemed to threaten the republican form of government in the United States. In the aftermath of the defeat, Senator Pierce Butler, a Jeffersonian Republican from South Carolina, feared not only the outbreak of a general Indian war, but also that the Federalists would use it as a “pretext” for subverting the American republic. He warned that they would establish “a standing Army” ostensibly to fight the Native Americans, but really to impose a military dictatorship and enrich the “New Bank” of the United States through deficit spending to finance the war.9

“The humiliation of this defeat,” as historians Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick observe, “together with the implications of what would be required in expense, military involvement, and reorganization to rectify its effects, would henceforth hang heavily over the public mood and preoccupy attention at all levels of government
for some time to come.” If anything, Elkins and McKitrick understate the panic that spread through the Ohio River Valley back to Philadelphia. Worries about future Native American victories and the precariousness of the republic in the face of the threat posed by the Northwestern Confederacy and its British allies prompted the federal government to devote over three-quarters of its operating budget to defeating the powerful Native American force in the West. This level of spending exceeded on a proportionate basis the levels of spending by the United States during World War II and the Cold War. Routing St. Clair on the Wabash also bolstered the Confederation’s resolve to maintain the Ohio River as their boundary with the United States. They had such confidence that they could defend their territory that on August 13, 1793 a Confederation council at the Miami Rapids advised the United States to send payments to the impoverished settlers who wanted trans-Ohio lands rather than waste money, lives, and time by raising yet another army: “we are persuaded they would most readily accept it in lieu of the lands you sold to them… [and] you will certainly have more than sufficient for the purposes of repaying these settlers for all their labour and improvements.” Their advice included the implicit suggestion that the Confederation would repel any force the United States sent into the Northwest. The American Indian triumphs also complicated Anglo-American relations by reviving British interest in mediating the western conflict and forming an Indian buffer state between the United States and Canada.10

Perhaps from a latent sense of inevitability, most historians have ignored the significance of the Native American achievements of 1790 and 1791. Because the battles did not halt American expansionism, historians reason, they must not have been important. Without the benefit of hindsight, however, contemporary actors believed that these battles, especially the victory over St. Clair, had international implications. It seemed as though one more such Indian victory/U.S. defeat might halt the western expansion of the republic. As news spread of the Native American victory over Harmar, British officials from the West Indies to Whitehall saw a great opportunity to exploit. Henry Hamilton, the governor of Bermuda, wrote to his superiors on the subject. No doubt recalling his humiliating defeat and captivity at the hands of George Rogers Clark during the American Revolution, Hamilton retained a keen interest in American Indian affairs in the Ohio Country. He noted that while U.S. policies had given the First Peoples “an implacable hatred” of the Americans, conversely British aid had “given the Indians considerable confidence in the good faith of the English Nation.”11

After learning of the Confederation’s victory over St. Clair and the stunning number of American casualties, Hamilton grew positively giddy. He concluded that the “extended frontier” of the United States had now become
a liability. “After the heavy loss of officers and men,” he reasoned, “the difficulties attending the raising of new levies will be (I should think) next to insurmountable.” Not only had the losses crippled American fighting morale, but “taxes will now be felt with all the disadvantages of inexperience, and whatever measures are adopted will no doubt be censured with all the bitterness of invective.” Hamilton predicted that the United States, weakened by the Native American victory, would be forced to accept British mediation to secure peace. Britain could then establish an American Indian state in the Ohio country, Hamilton hoped, stalling American expansionism while at the same time safeguarding the Great Lakes fur trade for Britain.12

British officials in Quebec and London echoed Hamilton’s enthusiasm. John Graves Simcoe, lieutenant governor of Canada, cautiously offered, the “recent defeat of Mr. St. Clair may be productive of beneficial consequences to the Government of Upper Canada [that is, present-day Ontario].” Secretary of Home Affairs Lord Melville agreed, noting that “the great object to be attended to is to secure such a Barrier against the American States by the intervention of the Indians” in the event of war with the United States. Blue Jacket’s victory over St. Clair had, it seemed, opened up a world of opportunities for British trade and Canadian defense. Britain’s minister to the United States, George Hammond, was directed to negotiate with those directives in mind.13

Rather than evacuating their forts in the territory of the United States, as they had promised in the Treaty of Paris, British troops instead built a new post, Fort Miami, west of Lake Erie and well within the American boundary line. At the same time, the Spanish closed the port of New Orleans, the only outlet for the produce of western farmers, putting additional pressure on the U.S. In short, the dual Native American victories put the United States in a precarious geostrategic position. “For the infant federal government,” historians Robert Hine and John Mack Faragher observe without hyperbole, “the future of the nation was at stake.” These American Indian victories pushed the small and vulnerable American republic to the breaking point.14

II

What historians might just as reasonably call “Blue Jacket’s Victory” as “St. Clair’s Defeat” was the greatest loss Native Americans inflicted on the U.S. Army. As historian Wiley Sword observes:

A staggering 55 percent of the [white] American combatants had become casualties within only a few hours. The dead and missing numbered 630… and in the Second United States Regiment three-fourths of the entire unit were lost. Of the approximately 1,400 persons who had been present, less than 500 remained uninjured, and many of the survivors were noncombatants. The officer corps was reduced by half. Sixty-nine of the 124 commissioned officers present were reported killed, wounded, or missing.15
In fact, the Miami, Delaware, and Shawnee inflicted losses on St. Clair more than three times those the Cheyenne and Lakota imposed on Custer in Montana Territory eighty-five years later. When placed in context it becomes clear that St. Clair’s defeat was far more devastating to the United States than Custer’s. Whereas Custer’s recklessness cost the U.S. Army 263 soldiers out of a total force of almost thirty thousand, St. Clair’s cost the U.S. Army almost one fifth of its total force—nine hundred out of a total of almost forty-six hundred. After the Northwestern Confederation’s first victory, Congress doubled the budget of the War Department. When the Confederation’s second victory demonstrated that was not enough, the president committed over 80 percent of the federal government’s operating budget to raising another expedition to subdue the Native Americans of the Northwest.16

Contemporaries also compared Blue Jacket’s victory over St. Clair to the Battle of Monongahela, fought on July 9, 1755 during the Seven Years War. There, six hundred Great Lakes and Ohio Valley Native Americans and a smattering of French regulars and Canadian militia killed four hundred thirty and wounded five hundred fifty Redcoats and American militia in a fight traditionally (and unfortunately) known as “Braddock’s Defeat.” The 1755 debacle provided an obvious point of reference for survivors of the 1791 defeat. One offered that “Braddock’s [defeat] is not to be compared considering ye numbers of each army.” A less accurate appraisal came from a leading newspaper in the federal capital, which reported that the American losses were “nearly equal to Braddock’s.” The president, himself a veteran of Braddock’s disastrous campaign, expressed disgust with St. Clair’s incompetence, reportedly exclaiming: “Oh God, Oh God, he is worse than a murderer! How can he answer to his country? The blood of the slain is upon him—the curse of widows and orphans—the curse of Heaven!” The president was not alone in blaming St. Clair for the fiasco. Beginning a time-honored tradition, Congress held hearings designed to shift blame away from the federal government and toward a scapegoat. Although the first congressional investigation in U.S. history cleared St. Clair of any wrongdoing and he escaped court-martial, his military career was over. Washington eventually forgave St. Clair, accepting his resignation from the army and allowing him to remain as governor of the Northwest Territory.17

American settlers on the frontier shared the president’s exasperation, and, of course, knew that they would suffer firsthand the consequences of the Native American victory. One Kentuckian believed that “there Must have been Some very Bad Conduct” by the troops and that St. Clair had not deployed them properly. Correspondents in Virginia described the rout of the U.S. Army as “truly alarming” because it made defeating the emboldened Native American confederacy far more difficult. Some Kentuckians, like Revolutionary War hero George Rogers Clark, not only shared concerns about
the lack of competent leadership in the army, but also openly wondered if the incompetence was deliberate—that is, that easterners were plotting to prolong the Native American war for nefarious reasons. Despite the absurdity of such charges, many Kentuckians had come to mistrust eastern intentions during the long political struggle to separate Kentucky from Virginia and achieve statehood. The botched campaigns angered Clark, as they did so many of his contemporaries. Betraying the widespread belief among westerners that only the military subjugation of the First Peoples would resolve the difficulties in the Northwest, he observed, “it is a pity that the Blood and Treasure of the people should be so lavished when one Campaign properly directed would put a final end to the war and...might establish a Harmony between us and the Indians that might exist for many years.”

The Northwestern Confederation’s victories appeared so lopsided that they led some white Americans, including members of Washington’s cabinet, to question their imperial ambitions in the region. Washington, however, recognized the symbolic as well as realpolitik significance of allowing consecutive defeats to stand as the fledgling nation’s record in fighting Native Americans. He also considered the fiscal implications. The president believed that public land sales north of the Ohio River worth winning. To allow white settlement to proceed, keep the revenue from land sales flowing into federal coffers, and reduce the federal debt, the United States would need to defeat the Northwestern Confederation on the battlefield. While pressing for negotiations, the president prepared for war. Washington settled upon Anthony Wayne, yet another Revolutionary veteran, to crush the Northwestern Confederation. Wayne commanded a disciplined army that moved with deadly efficiency. Dubbed the “Legion of the United States” by the war secretary, Wayne’s three thousand soldiers displayed the near invincibility of the Romans in their heyday, marching rapidly—they moved at almost twice the rate of St. Clair’s ragged troops—and building fortified camps at night. In the process, they made themselves nearly unassailable. Wayne had learned from his predecessors’ mistakes.

Wayne’s Legion defeated Blue Jacket’s force of some seven hundred Native American warriors and a few Canadian rangers at the Battle of Fallen Timbers (August 20, 1794). Negotiating from a position of strength at the deliberations for the Treaty of Greenville (June 16-August 3, 1795), Wayne dispossessed the Northwestern First Peoples of much of their land. In exchange for three-quarters of what became the state of Ohio as well as several strategic points along the Great Lakes, including the future towns of Chicago and Detroit, Wayne gave the Native Americans nine thousand five hundred dollars in annuities and formal recognition of their claim to the rest of the Northwest Territory.
Until the last few decades, American historians paid little heed to Native Americans, whether victorious or defeated, when describing their battles with white Americans. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, their assessments of St. Clair’s leadership ranged from a complete vindication of his “meritorious efforts” in the face of long odds to incredulity at his “incompetence,” though all historians agreed that the American force was inferior in training and skill, if not in numbers, to their Native American adversaries. As Theodore Roosevelt, a historian as well as a historical figure, observed of St. Clair:

He did not, or could not, train his troops; and he had no business to challenge a death fight with raw levies. It was unpardonable of him to send back one of his two regular regiments, the only trustworthy portion of his force, on the eve of the battle. He should never have posted the militia, his poorest troops, in the most exposed situation. Above all, he should have seen that the patrols and pickets were so numerous and performed their duty so dutifully, as to preclude the possibility of surprise. With the kind of army furnished him, he could hardly have won a victory under any circumstances; but the overwhelming nature of the defeat was mainly due to his incompetence.\(^{21}\)

American historians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emphasized atrocities committed by the triumphant Native Americans on the helpless American soldiers. In 1840, S. J. Burr graphically described Native American warriors scalping “the struggling and wounded victim[s]” as well as “their dead and dying companions.” With poetic license, American novelist and poet William Dean Howells in 1897 described how Native American warriors “tomahawked and scalped” their victims so vigorously that “one of the savages told afterwards that he plied his hatchet until he could barely lift his arm.” In 1907, Roosevelt claimed that the Northwestern Confederation took “but one or two” American soldiers prisoner, “for the Indians butchered everybody, wounded or unwounded, who fell into their hands.” He added that the “savage Chippewas,” had engaged in “one singular instance of cannibalism” that filled “the other tribes...[with] horror.” In 1926, Princeton University historian Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker bluntly described the Native Americans as “savages” who tore some prisoners “limb from limb” and put others to death “by driving stakes through their bodies.” Such accounts made no mention of white American encroachment on American Indian land as the ultimate cause of the conflict. Typical was Burr’s account, which described the Native Americans as “savages” determined to “annihilate every [white] settler on the border.” In a more even-handed albeit racist account, Roosevelt admitted, “the red men were as little disposed as the white [men] to accept a peace on any terms that were
possible.” Wertenbaker offered perhaps the best of these early depictions when he observed that the “savages…were alarmed at the encroachment of the Ohio settlers on their hunting-grounds.”

Even mid-nineteenth century historians shuddered at the magnitude of St. Clair’s defeat. In 1852, Richard Hildreth noted that American losses “reached the unusual proportion of six hundred.” Like the participants, many American historians compared “St. Clair’s Defeat” to Braddock’s earlier reversal. In 1848, Israel Daniel Rupp conceded that the American losses were “unparalleled except in Braddock’s disastrous defeat” in order to vindicate the American general’s course by invidious comparison to his British counterpart. James R. Albach believed that St. Clair’s defeat overshadowed Braddock’s as “the most terrible reverse the American arms ever suffered from the Indians.” The Battle of the Little Bighorn did nothing to change the assessment. In 1907, John Bach McMaster observed, “never has there been such a crushing Indian victory” as the Northwestern Confederation’s triumph over St. Clair. In 1913, historian Milo Milton Quaife agreed, calling it “the most disastrous campaign ever waged by an American army against the Indians.” These early American historians called the battle “St. Clair’s Defeat,” as had white Americans in 1791. Their use of an ethnocentric name for the battle is not surprising inasmuch as they unfailingly described the victors as “red men” or “savages.”
More surprising, modern historians have retained this nomenclature even though they have dispensed with the racist epithets for Native Americans, considered their motivations for waging war, and observed that both Native Americans and white Americans committed atrocities in the bitter fighting along the Ohio frontier. Historians’ use of the names Harmar’s Defeat and St. Clair’s Defeat may explain why all but specialists in the early American republic and Native American history neglect these encounters. Most modern popular accounts, ranging from Kenneth Davis’s *Don’t Know Much About History* to Thomas Woods’s *The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History* say little about these battles. The exception that proves the rule, James Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, aims to remedy the inadequacies of United States history textbooks for the benefit of general readers. Loewen accurately describes Native Americans as “the most lied-about subset of our population,” and notes that in what he calls the “Battle of the Wabash River” they killed more American soldiers than Spain did in the Spanish-American War. Despite the improvement in nomenclature, Loewen fails to explain that the battle represented the greatest Native American victory over the U.S. military.24

Modern academic works often do little better than popular ones in their tendency to downplay the importance of the Northwestern Confederation’s dual victories. Although Elkins and McKittrick’s *Age of Federalism* acknowledges the “considerable significance” of the battles, the authors devote only a couple of pages to them. They also fumble the details, incorrectly stating that the Confederation warriors “slaughtered over nine hundred” American soldiers. Daniel Richter’s *Facing East from Indian Country* describes the battles in just one page, though he observes that the Confederation’s victories put the lie to white American notions of military superiority. He adds that St. Clair’s defeat was “proportionately one of the worst defeats federal troops would ever endure against any foe.” Modern scholarly accounts of the various Native American nations follow much the same pattern, though with superior accuracy. In *The Potawatomis*, David Edmunds briefly covers Harmar’s defeat before noting that, “St. Clair’s defeat was the greatest Indian victory over an American military force in all of American history.” In *Shawnee*, James Howard places Harmar’s defeat in the wrong year before noting that “St. Clair’s defeat, in which his army dissolved in panic and fled south after suffering over nine hundred casualties, has been called the worst defeat ever inflicted by Indians on a white army,” a passive voice formulation that tends to discount its significance. In *The Miami Indians of Indiana*, Stewart Rafert recounts Harmar’s defeat from the American perspective, describing it as “embarrassing,” before noting that St. Clair’s rout was “a virtual replay of Braddock’s disastrous defeat of 1755 and was by far the largest defeat ever suffered by an American army at the hands of Indians—or anyone else—with a 32 percent overall loss of manpower.”25


Most modern reference works treat these important battles only in passing, effectively ignoring them. The *Dictionary of American History*’s entry on the “Northwest Territory” obliquely notes the Confederation’s two victories: “Native alliances initially took a severe toll on American forces, and at times as much as 80 percent of the entire federal budget went to fighting and removing Indians from their lands.” Likewise, *The Oxford Companion to United States History* states that:

> tribal coalitions continued to resist, but the evacuation of British and Spanish troops from American soil during the 1790s made foreign aid more difficult for Woodlands peoples to obtain, and the last great uprising east of the Mississippi—led by the Shawnee chief Tecumseh…was defeated in 1811, after which Native Americans had little remaining means to oppose land cessions and westward removal.

Standard references for Native American history also downplay resistance in the Northwest Territory. The *Handbook of North American Indians*’ entry on First Peoples in the Ohio Valley explains in anodyne understatement that the Treaty of Greenville ended a “period of hostilities.” The *Handbook*’s entry for the Miami asserts that their resistance to white encroachment “culminated in their defeat of Arthur St. Clair in 1791, an action in which 630 [white] Americans were killed.” A noteworthy exception, the *Encyclopedia of American Indian Wars*, explains that St. Clair’s defeat was “staggering, the worst ever suffered by the U.S. Army up to that time in terms of the numbers engaged.” Even modern biographical accounts of Little Turtle and Blue Jacket, the victorious generals, sell this great victory short. Entries in both the *Dictionary of American Biography* and the *American National Biography* fail to note the significance of “St. Clair’s Defeat,” the latter’s entry on Arthur St. Clair conceding that Blue Jacket’s victory over him was “the deadliest ever for U.S. forces fighting Native Americans,” while its entry on Blue Jacket does not.26

In general, modern textbooks lag even farther behind popular accounts, scholarly surveys, and reference works in their treatment of the Northwestern Confederation’s two victories. Historian James Hijiya observes that textbooks’ neglect of Indians is symptomatic of their neglect of the West in general. Some of the leading textbooks used in United States history survey classes ignore these stunning reverses suffered by the American military. For example, the innovative *Inventing America* makes no mention of them. The National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA, the principal
authors of the excellent proposed National History Standards, commit the sin of omission when recommending classroom exercises for ambitious teachers. Even Jeannette Henry’s *Textbooks and the American Indian*, a laudable effort to correct the ethnocentric bias of United States history textbooks in relation to Native American matters, misses this glaring example. Other texts treat the two battles in the same way. James Axtell’s remarks about textbook accounts of the role of Indians in the “Age of Discovery” apply equally well to the early republic: “the half-truths about Indians are perhaps worse than the errors.” In a single sentence, George Brown Tindall and David Shi’s *America* relegates the dual victories to a mere distraction from the ongoing negotiations over the Jay Treaty: “while [John] Jay was haggling in London, frontier conflict with Indians escalated, with American troops twice crushed by northwestern Indians.” In their classic *Growth of the American Republic*, Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager state that “the 1795 Treaty of Greenville ended a period in which the Northwest Indians had usually been the aggressors, and put them on the defensive,” simultaneously inverting the roles of invader and defender while discounting Native American military success. In *A Patriot’s History of the United States*—a conservative counter to Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*—Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen are in such a rush to get to the white Americans’ victory at the Battle of Fallen Timbers that they ignore the Confederation’s first victory and dismiss its second as an “initial defeat” for the United States.27

Even when United States history textbooks cover the Northwestern Confederation’s triumphs, they often fail to place them in proper context. The authors of *Created Equal* give an adequate account of these battles as well as the decisive white American victory at the Battle of Fallen Timbers and the subsequent Treaty of Greenville, but they do not describe the second victory as the greatest defeat ever suffered by the forces of the United States at the hands of the First Peoples. Similarly, Peter Carroll’s *We the People* treats Native American resistance in the Northwest in the 1790s and its military and diplomatic conclusion with the Battle of Fallen Timbers and the Treaty of Greenville with the blandly understated summary: “expeditions in 1790 and 1791 brought U.S. defeats.” The desultory similarity in the treatment of these battles by numerous U.S. history textbooks is an example of a wider phenomenon that has recently embarrassed the authors and publishers of such works. As a reporter for the *New York Times* observed in reference to identical passages in two textbooks describing the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 written by “uncredited writers,” the textbook industry is “replete with examples of this phenomenon.”28

The best United States history survey textbooks provide a full account of the Northwestern Confederation’s victories, but use the ethnocentric names or no names at all for the battles. Alan Brinkley’s *American History* describes Little Turtle as a “famed warrior” and credits the Confederation’s second victory as
“the greatest military victory Indians had or would ever achieve in their battles with [American] whites,” but Brinkley does not give this battle a name. He also ignores the Confederation’s first victory over the United States. The others follow this pattern. Ignoring Harmar’s force (and its subsequent defeat), Maldwyn Jones’s *The Limits of Liberty* reports that “in 1791, Ohio Indians inflicted a stunning reverse on Governor Arthur St. Clair’s force, but a second American punitive expedition, under General Anthony Wayne, decisively defeated them at the battle of Fallen Timbers.” Eric Foner’s *Give Me Liberty* describes the “humiliating defeat” inflicted upon St. Clair’s force: “with 630 dead, this was the costliest loss ever suffered by the United States Army at the hands of Indians.” Zinn’s *People’s History* offers the best textbook treatment of the battles. Zinn cleverly substitutes illustrative ethnocentric names to remedy the problems of the traditional nomenclature and includes both Indian victories: “the expeditions they sent westward to establish this [white American dominion over the land] were overcome—which they recognized in the names they gave these battles: Harmar’s Humiliation and St. Clair’s Shame.”

This pattern persists in textbooks used in specialized courses. Reginald Horsman’s *The New Republic*, the leading textbook for the early American republic, mentions the Native American victories in passing, devoting just part of one sentence to them and avoiding the names commonly given to them. Colin Calloway’s *First Peoples*, a leading textbook for American Indian history, dances around the ethnocentric names by not naming the battles. Nonetheless, it...
describes Blue Jacket’s victory over St. Clair as “the heaviest defeat Indians ever inflicted on the United States.” Putting these battles in the context of the precarious geostrategic position of the United States in the early 1790s, it also explains that “by contrast, General Custer’s famous defeat at the Little Big Horn in 1876 was a relatively minor setback to a powerful United States in its drive for the West.” R. David Edmunds, Frederick Hoxie, and Neal Salisbury’s *The People* does much the same when it notes that “St. Clair’s defeat was the greatest Indian victory over an American military force in all of American history.” Furthermore, its authors cleverly omit capitalizing “defeat” when describing both battles, subtly indicating that the traditional names need improvement.30

While academics have overlooked the Northwestern Confederation’s victories of 1790 and 1791, some popular historical writers and novelists have covered them in recent years. Best-selling author James Alexander Thom’s *From Sea to Shining Sea* (a novel based on the careers of George Rogers Clark and William Clark) briefly describes the Confederation’s rout of St. Clair. Thom notes that even counting the much larger battles of the American Revolution, “never had so many American soldiers died in a single engagement.” Allan Eckert’s *That Dark and Bloody River* discusses the 1791 battle for five pages, calling it “the worst disaster ever to have befallen Americans at the hands of the Indians.” Notably, both popular authors use the word “disaster” to describe the battle from the white American perspective, and both refrain from affixing a name to the engagement.31

**IV**

Why did the even costlier U.S. defeat at the Battle of the Wabash Forks fade from American collective memory, while the Little Bighorn looms so large? Several factors played a role. However devastating the Native American victory of 1791, it lacked the totality of Little Bighorn. As Edward Linenthal notes, “the act of shedding the blood of one’s enemy and the willing sacrifice of one’s own life have often been perceived as acts that transformed the world, acts through which the warrior fulfills his martial mission of protection and salvation.” While an astounding number of St. Clair’s men died, his army also had many survivors, himself among them. Their campaign neither transformed the world nor how Americans perceived it, and their failure offered quite the opposite of salvation. Incompetent military leaders must die to become heroes, while survivors tend to become scapegoats.32

Anthony Wayne’s army included some veterans of the failed campaigns of 1790 and 1791, and at least one, William Wells, had fought for the Miami before returning to his white roots. Wayne’s Legion actively sought to avoid repeating their predecessors’ mistakes, but there is no evidence that they used the previous battles for positive inspiration. No one shouted “Remember St. Clair!” or “Avenge Harmar!” as the Legion advanced. Perhaps the Native American victories
were simply too traumatic to serve as battle cries. After Wayne’s victory at the Battle of Fallen Timbers and its consolidation at the Treaty of Greenville, white Americans found it easier to neglect the unpleasantness of the earlier battles. In succeeding decades, as they internalized the verities of Manifest Destiny, it became all the more acceptable, even preferable, to forget conflicts with Native Americans east of the Mississippi (including the victims of Indian Removal) as trivial components of a broader fait accompli. Why bother with the prologue when you know the ending?

In contrast, what white Americans remembered as “Custer’s Last Stand” had any number of advantages in the battle for public memory. The Lakota and Cheyenne whipped the U.S. cavalry within weeks of the July 1876 centennial of American Independence. That fact alone, amplified by the proliferation of newspapers in comparison to the early 1790s, helps explain the national fascination with Sitting Bull’s victory. That a decorated war hero like Custer was so convincingly beaten by “savages” on the frontier produced a shock in the midst of a nationwide celebration of American exceptionalism. The greatly expanded echo chamber of the American popular press in Custer’s day helped to fix that battle in the national memory. Furthermore, Custer died, along with his entire detachment. The popular image of Custer as the final cavalryman to die—his “last stand”—became an inherently poignant and easily romanticized image. Newspapers and dime novels had little trouble comparing Custer’s presumed self-sacrifice to Leonidas’s at Thermopylae, Colonel William B. Travis’s at the Alamo, or the Light Brigade’s at Balaclava. By dying on the field of battle Custer became eligible for incorporation into the pantheon of American mythic heroes whose personal blood sacrifice led to eventual victory for the nation. In addition to these memorable advantages over St. Clair, Custer also had an adoring, almost obsessed, widow bent on removing any possible tarnish from his name. Elizabeth Custer did not die until 1933, by which time she had kept the late cavalryman’s critics largely at bay until he had become a cultural icon. By the early twentieth century, Custer’s “last stand” had been stamped on the American psyche via Anheuser-Busch Company’s marketing campaign and Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. What happened to St. Clair and his force at the forks of the Wabash simply could not compete.

The names by which we remember such events have important consequences even in the contemporary United States. As historian Jill Lepore observes in her study of King Philip’s War, “how wars are remembered can be just as important as how they were fought and first described.” Indeed, the ethnocentric names given to the battles of 1790 and 1791 have the effect of cheating the Northwestern Confederation of its hard-won if short-lived triumph over the United States, contributing to what historian Tom Engelhardt calls “an American culture of victory.” As part of what he describes as “mobilizing preludes to victory,” “Harmar’s
“Defeat” and “St. Clair’s Defeat” paved the way for “Wayne’s Victory” and the Treaty of Greenville. Englehardt argues that the “nearly 250 years of Indian wars that ‘cleared’ the continent for settlement” played a foundational role in establishing this victory culture, cleansing the white victors of any aggression or atrocity while at the same time denying the Native American vanquished all legitimate defense, if not bravery. Scholar Norman Finkelstein demonstrates how similar rhetoric has been part of imperial conquests ranging from the Zionists in Palestine to the French in Algeria, from the Afrikaners in South Africa to the Nazis in Eastern Europe.

The names given to these battles have great significance. When asked what his people called them, a tribal historian of the Miami Nation of Indians of Indiana answered that they use the only names they have ever heard for them: “Harmar’s Defeat” and “St. Clair’s Defeat.” When asked if such Eurocentric nomenclature troubled him or his fellow Miamis, he responded, “We have so many other problems, it’s really not that high on our list.” However, when asked if the relative obscurity of these Native American victories troubled him, he became far more animated. He suggested the possibility that the U.S. government had a vested interest in muting such information.

Admittedly, the modern secondary and tertiary references cited above have generally repeated misnomers for the Northwestern Confederation’s two victories due to oversight, rather than any desire to whitewash history. Indeed, several of these historians have resorted to ingenious circumlocutions to avoid ethnocentrism. Nonetheless, the end result marginalizes Native American resistance. Yet while the merits of changing the names of battlefields involving First Peoples might seem obvious, what Edward Linenthal observes of the Native American victory in Montana Territory in 1876 applies equally well to that in the Northwest Territory in 1791. “The [modern] struggle over the proper name of the battlefield,” Linenthal demonstrates, “was an important ongoing battle in the war for symbolic dominance.” In a book review of a recent biography of a famous Indian fighter that appeared in a leading scholarly journal, a distinguished historian of the U.S. Army’s Indian wars laments:

The politically correct 1990s have spawned an ongoing campaign to bury the memory of George Armstrong Custer. In 1991 Congress removed Custer’s name from the national park where he made his famed last stand. To mark the 120th anniversary of Custer’s defeat in June 1996, officials at Little Bighorn National Monument staged several programs honoring the native tribes that participated in the engagement but none for Custer, and his 7th Cavalrymen. The week’s festivities climaxed in a victory dance performed by Sioux and Cheyenne descendants over the mass grave containing the remains of Custer’s troops.
As Jill Lepore notes, “all wars have at least two names”; so do all battles. Accordingly, we propose alternative names for the dual victories of the Northwestern Confederation over the United States. Despite Lepore’s claim that “names of wars are always biased; they always privilege one perspective over another,” the use of neutral geographic names for these battles will give them the attention they so richly deserve. As tempting as it might be to recast “Harmar’s Defeat” as “Blue Jacket’s First Victory” and “St. Clair’s Defeat” as “Blue Jacket’s Second Victory” to give credit to the victor and remedy several centuries of anti-Native American historical writing, such a nomenclature would merely perpetuate the one-sidedness and ethnocentrism of previous names, not to mention its great-man-of-history focus. Instead, these battles should be named properly and objectively after geographic features—like the Battle of the Little Bighorn—rather than for any person or belligerent. Thus, “Harmar’s Defeat” would become the “Battle of Kekionga,” and “St. Clair’s Defeat” the “Battle of the Wabash Forks.”


6 Sword, Washington’s Indian War, 167-71; Gov. St. Clair to the Half-King and the Chiefs of the Wyandots, Mar. 8, 1791, in ASP, Indian Affairs, 1:147. Traditionally, historians have assigned Little Turtle the role of “commander in chief” of the Native American force in these battles, even though such a title does not translate into Native American practices. Sugden, Blue Jacket, 5, argues that Little Turtle belonged to a council of respected warriors, while Blue Jacket was the most significant war leader in the victories over Harmar and St. Clair.

7 Sword, Washington’s Indian War, 176-91, covers the battle in detail.


9 Samuel McDowell to Andrew Reid, Dec. 8, 1791, Samuel McDowell Papers, FHS; Gov. Henry Lee, in Elkins and McKitrick, Age of Federalism, 271; Pierce Butler to Robert Goodloe Harper, Feb. 18, 1792, and
Pierce Butler to John Houston, Nov. 25, 1792, Pierce Butler Papers, South Carolina Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia (hereafter SCL-USC).


11 Henry Hamilton to Henry Dundas (Lord Melville), Apr. 18, 1791, CO 37/43, f. 9, National Archives of Britain, Kew, England (hereafter NAB).

12 Extract of Henry Hamilton to George Hammond, Jan. 13, 1792, CO 37/43, f. 222, NAB.

13 John Graves Simcoe to Henry Dundas, Feb. 16, 1792, CO 42/316, f. 76, NAB; Henry Dundas to John Graves Simcoe, May 5, 1792, CO 42/316, f. 116, NAB.


15 Sword, Washington’s Indian War, 195.


17 Fred Anderson, Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766 (New York: Knopf, 2000), 760; Michael McDonough to Patrick McDonough, Nov. 10, 1791, WLG-UM; Federal Gazette and Evening Post (Philadelphia), Dec. 9, 1791; ASP, Military Affairs, 1:36-39, 41-44.

18 Arthur Campbell to John Steele, Jan. 2, 1792, and John Steele to Arthur Campbell, Jan. 29, 1792, Papers of Arthur Campbell, FHS; George Rogers Clark to Jonathan Clark, n.d., 1792, George Rogers Clark Papers, FHS.


20 Sugden, Blue Jacket, 176; Sword, Washington’s Indian War, 324-31.


33 Ibid., 23-29.


35 John Dunnagan, vice-chief and historian of the Miami Indians of Indiana, phone interview, Aug. 7, 2006 (notes in possession of authors).


37 Lepore, Name of War, xv. Kekionga (or Miamitown) was the de facto capital of the Northwest Confederation. It lies near present-day Toledo, Ohio, in the Maumee Valley. John Grenier, The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 199, and Loewen, Lies My Teacher Told Me, 109, anticipate this second turn of phrase, respectively naming the second contest the “Battle of the Wabash” and “Battle of the Wabash River.”

SUMMER 2012        23
The Dilemma of Dissent
Kentucky’s Whigs and the Mexican War
Joseph W. Pearson

“For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” —Mark 8:36

“Mexico will poison us.” —Ralph Waldo Emerson

Elections have consequences. On March 30, 1847, few Americans understood this better than Kentucky’s Henry Clay. Spring had finally come to Ashland, Clay’s Lexington plantation, but the bright sunshine and first smells of honeysuckle and freshly cut bluegrass could not lift the dark pallor that marked a house in mourning. James Brown Clay had interrupted his parents’ quiet dinner the night before with word from Mexico. Zachary Taylor’s army had won an improbable victory over the Mexican forces at Buena Vista, but Henry Clay Jr., his father’s namesake and political and intellectual heir, was slain. The elder Clay searched the depths of Providence for solace and took no comfort in the knowledge that but for a small turn of political fate three years previous his “lamented Son” would still be alive. Clay narrowly lost the presidency in 1844 to the dark horse, James K. Polk, and watched helplessly as the United States plunged into a war for empire with Mexico. And now his favorite child lay dead on a wind-swept plain in northern Mexico.¹

Clay and his Whig allies’ principled, though qualified, stand against annexation clashed with the national appetite for territory in 1844 and they paid the price at the polls in 1844 and beyond. It cost Clay both the presidency and his son. By 1847, Clay’s friends railed against Texas annexation and the war it had spawned, but those vague paens to moral principle rang hollow. Again and again, Kentucky’s Whigs joined their political brethren across the Ohio Valley and condemned Texas and the prospect of annexation. “The ratification of the annexation treaty would be, of itself, war between the United States and Mexico,” the Lexington Observer and Reporter predicted, “the war would be an unjust war, it would be unconstitutionally made, [and] it would be a war upon a weak and groundless pretext.” From the Whig perspective, any war with Mexico represented a base, immoral land grab.²

Yet when the test came, Kentucky’s predominantly Whig congressional delegation voted overwhelmingly for war. In fairness, so did the vast majority of other congressmen. On May 14, 1846, only thirteen representatives and two senators
rose from their desks to join John Quincy Adams’s conscientious objections to “Mr. Polk’s War.” Kentucky Whig congressman Garrett Davis also blasted the president’s war message, noting, “But I charge and arraign James K. Polk with having, as President of the United States, during the present session, usurped the power of Congress by making war upon Mexico, a nation with whom the United States were at peace.” Nonetheless, Kentucky’s senators and congressmen, including Davis, voted repeatedly to continue funding the Mexican War long after a good portion of the public began to question the war’s conduct and motives. Moreover, Kentuckians from all across the commonwealth, Whigs as
well as Democrats, hurried to volunteer after Congress voted and accepted Polk’s war. Despite the rush of enthusiasm from many of their own number, Whigs in the Bluegrass State and across the Ohio Valley hammered Polk and his schemes for empire in speeches, letters, and editorials almost from the outset. Why did Kentucky’s Whigs vote to declare and fund a war they and their constituents interpreted as morally repugnant? Perhaps more important, why did so many Whigs rally to a war that both their political inclinations and moral perspective told them was wrong?

Whigs were not stupid. They understood that most wars initially proved popular and recalcitrant politicians risked political suicide by voting against funding troops in the field. By the 1840s only a foolish or fanatical politician had forgotten the disastrous Hartford Convention and the doom it spelled for the old Federalist Party. At the convention, the vitriolic opposition of New England Federalists to the War of 1812 led many to embrace secession as a viable option. After Andrew Jackson’s stunning victory over the British at New Orleans on January 8, 1815, however, the Federalists’ poorly timed dissent led to their collapse as a national political party. Moreover, as southern conservatives, Kentucky’s congressional Whigs sought to minimize national conflict over slavery’s extension through territorial conquest. They may have deplored “Mr. Polk’s War” as an example of executive overreach, but new territory promised to renew the national debate over slavery’s extension along sectional rather than party lines. These factors illuminate the party’s growing distaste for the Mexican War as it dragged on into its second year, but they fail to explain Whigs’ vibrant enthusiasm for service in a war most believed misguided and dissolute. Grudging political calculation seldom induces men to rush to arms and risk death on a distant battlefield.

Deeper social and cultural forces were at work. Manifest destiny and its appeal to national conceit proved a powerful drug when mixed with state and local pride, clouding Whigs’ judgment and setting them on the road to political ruin. Kentucky’s Whigs joined the army in droves, yet expansionism damaged their political agenda and compromised their moral vision of American development. Throughout the age of Jackson, Whigs believed in nurturing the moral, economic, and social possibilities of American society. They imagined a world in which Americans developed themselves and their country over time, not space. Yet the quixotic pursuit of martial glory overrode political and ideological scruples and set many a sturdy Whig tramping off to war in Mexico. Whigs faced an ideological dilemma. On the one hand, they objected to territorial expansion by
military conquest. On the other, most backed the American troops fighting on the Rio Grande and many sought to join them to win glory and honor. Supporting the army, they said, did not mean supporting the war. Most Whigs tried and failed to maintain such contradictory positions. Ultimately, vast territories won in the name of divine mission or crass conquest led to the same political quandaries. Expansionism threatened to sectionalize the parties over slavery and set the republic on the road to civil war. At stake was whose vision of the future would guide the United States going forward. The response in Kentucky and across the Ohio Valley to the Mexican War represented an ideological crisis of faith for Whigs. The manly call of battle, bolstered by a brash, potent nationalism, lured many to betray their political and ideological perspective for the sake of empire.

The Mexican War and the violent expansionism undergirding it provoked deep social and cultural anxieties among Kentucky’s Whigs. In the years before the guns erupted on the Rio Grande in 1846, their vision of American development included improving both the countryside with canals, turnpikes, and railroads and the minds and morals of the citizenry though education and benevolent societies. Whigs and Democrats had fought a social, cultural, and political war for America’s soul since 1832, when Andrew Jackson bested their champion, Henry Clay, in a bitter contest for the White House. Democrats claimed to stand for the “common man”—yeoman farmers, mechanics, artisans, and landless white men—against the contrived artifices of entrenched banking and political elites. They denounced the Bank of the United States, protective tariffs, and nationally funded plans for internal improvement. Whigs viewed Democrats’ efforts with skepticism and alarm, fearing that behind them lay nothing more than grasping demagogues sweeping aside all the wisdom of custom and tradition in their reckless drive to enthrone “King Mob.”6

Yet the ideological gulf between Whigs and Democrats went much deeper than mere policy debates. Nineteenth-century political parties were more than social clubs where like-minded individuals debated hackneyed issues before heading off to indulge in more important pursuits. Instead, they constituted political communities for Americans with similar social, cultural, and moral perspectives. Parties allowed Americans both to adhere to their interpretations of the past and pursue their visions of the future, while also challenging others with whom they disagreed. Whiggery thus represented an “imagined community,” where ideas were the coin of the realm, and whose borders crossed both class and gender lines. Although denied the franchise, women played an important role in social and moral reform movements, and often found a political and ideological home within Whiggery. Party members shared a common cause in their view of social and cultural mores, gender roles, education, religion, family, and political activism. Party ideologies and activities gave them a social outlet to articulate and defend their partisan vision of America.7
Kentucky’s Whigs shared these values and aspirations. “This is the most trying time the Whigs have to meet,” the Lexington Observer and Reporter lamented as its editor tried to rally Whig hopes after Clay’s bitter loss to Polk in 1844. “May we not ask them to meet it as Whigs—as Whigs of Kentucky—as that ancient and indomitable band that constituted the forlorn hope of the country for a long, long night of Jacksonian and Van Buren rule?” The editor tried to rally party hopes and urged Kentucky Whigs to remember that at stake was more than political offices and controversial legislation. Whigs demanded more from government and people than their Democratic opponents and that made all the difference. Public schools, hospitals and asylums for the insane and infirm, better roads for travel and commerce, funding for railroads, and state-sponsored banks represented just a few of the improvements they sought from state and national leaders. More important, Whigs believed they fought to preserve the republic, won from Great Britain by their revolutionary fathers. They took as an article of political faith that public virtue and a healthy skepticism of concentrated power undergirded the revolutionary heritage.8

Whigs abhorred aggressive territorial expansion because it threatened more than their political hopes—and many in Kentucky knew it. “Ever since the shameful project of annexing a portion of [a] neighboring power to this Union was made known,” the Covington-based Licking Valley Register cautioned, “we have continued to warn the people of the ruinous consequences that would flow from the perpetration of such an act. Among these consequences we have frequently asserted, the disgrace which it would bring upon us as a nation.” Annexation raised questions of moral principle. John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” lived on in the imaginations of many Kentucky Whigs who believed that the United States occupied a special moral high ground. America would, indeed should, throw light into the dark recesses of the world by setting the example of moral improvement and scientific achievement at home. Whigs believed that developing America morally, socially, and economically over time, not space, would best assure stability and freedom. Annexing Texas would likely spark a war with Mexico in which the stain to national honor caused by public hubris and political calculation promised to be as great as any loss on the field of arms.9

Equally troubling, Democratic presidents, while singing political hymns to “the people,” often flouted or ignored republican principles and constitutional precedents to achieve their ends. In April 1845, Henry Clay cited the debates over Texas as especially revealing. “The unconstitutional manners,” Clay wrote, “more than the simple act of annexation ought to fill every enlightened patriot with alarm and apprehension. It will, I fear, totally change the peaceful character of the Republic, converting us in the end into a warlike, conquering Nation, until we raise up some Military Chieftain who will conquer us all.” Here, Clay decried John Tyler and his Democratic allies’ decision to eschew Senate ratification of the treaty admitting Texas in favor of a joint resolution, passed by simple majorities of both houses. Annexing Texas in this fashion, with the legislature bowing to what the Whigs saw as presidential fiat, pointed to
an ominous future of executive usurpation. What limits existed for a majority party or sitting president if the Constitution itself could be set aside with impunity?10

Despite these protests, Texas joined the Union on December 29, 1845. President James K. Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor south to the Rio Grande to secure American claims. Responding to rumors that Mexican troops had crossed the river to hit the vulnerable American flanks, Taylor sent Captain Seth B. Thornton upriver with two squadrons of cavalry on April 24, 1846. The following day a sixteen hundred man Mexican cavalry detachment ambushed Thornton, killing sixteen U.S. soldiers. Polk’s chance had come at last. “Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States,” he explained rather dubiously in his war message to Congress on May 11, 1846, “[and] has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American soil.” Polk made a spurious claim given the haziness of the boundary between Texas and Mexico, but by May 1846 most Americans cared little whether the border was the Nueces River or the Rio Grande or why Taylor’s army sat so deeply in contested territory. Except for perhaps two or three counties surrounding John Quincy Adams’s Peacefield farm in Massachusetts, war fever raged through the country. Rarely has a parched one hundred fifty-mile strip of jutting arroyos, tangled brush, and a few lost steers loomed so large in American history.11
In Kentucky, war fever swept up both Whigs and Democrats. Men, women, and children gathered in Lexington, Louisville, Paris, Maysville, and Frankfort to sing patriotic songs, watch the militia drill, and discuss the volunteer efforts and recruiting. With Kentuckians’ martial dander up many Whigs’ stood willing to fight, despite their political reservations. “We are opposed to mingling party prejudices in this question,” wrote one Whig editor, “[and] for a vindication of the National Rights and character. And to this end, we would hush the voice of party, and have the whole nation united, in the bonds of brotherhood against the insulters of the Nation.” In deigning to defend land that probably belonged to them, Mexico had challenged American character and martial prowess. Such defiance could not stand unanswered. And not just in Kentucky did Whigs quell their qualms of conscience with the call of battle. Whigs in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois joined Kentuckians in their thirst for martial glory. After churches across Springfield, Illinois, let out on Sunday, May 31, 1846, native Kentuckian and rising Whig stalwart Abraham Lincoln joined a coterie of Whig political and business leaders rallying men to the cause. These Illinois Whigs lauded “the necessity of the prompt and unified action of her citizen soldiery, to sustain her national character, secure our national rights, as well as a lasting peace.” A year and a half later in December 1847, Lincoln dissented publicly, offering his famous “Spot Resolutions” in the House of Representatives. But he initially joined his fellow western Whigs in boisterously sending their boys off to war. Most Whigs saw a chance for military glory they could not resist.12

The seeds of war fell on fertile ground in the Bluegrass State. Like most antebellum Americans, Kentucky Whigs felt keenly the growing pull of American nationalism in the decade and a half before the Mexican War. Alexis de Tocqueville observed as much while visiting the United States in 1831-32. “In their relations with foreigners,” Tocqueville noted of youthful American bombast and national pride, “Americans seem irritated by the slightest criticism and appear greedy for praise. The flimsiest compliment pleases them and the most fulsome rarely manages to satisfy them; they plague you constantly to make you praise them and, if you show yourself reluctant, they praise themselves.” This cultural attribute only grew in the next decade. Throughout the 1840s most Americans, Whigs among them, had few scruples about praising themselves. A deep-seated pride in the revolutionary generation’s triumphant break with Great Britain and a rock-ribbed belief in the exceptional, even “divine,” nature of American republicanism created a brash love of country that permeated American culture. America, many argued, differed from any country the world had ever known. Across the young republic, from the hustling streets of Philadelphia and New York, to the bustling Cheapside hemp and slave markets in Lexington, an urgent nationalism coursed through the veins of most Americans.13
Kentuckians loved to display their patriotism through elaborate, often partisan, Independence Day celebrations. Party members gathered together on town squares, open fields, and in churches and schoolhouses to celebrate American Independence and offer their interpretations of orthodox patriotism. In 1844, Lexington's Whigs urged the town's merchants to honor the day, close their shops, and dismiss their clerks to attend public meetings and hear patriotic speeches. Hemp planters and their friends on the bench brought their families and favorite slaves in from the countryside to watch the militia drill, sing hymns to America's greatness, and after the women and children left, drink copious amounts of Kentucky bourbon. Middling and working class men did not bother to wait. These patriotic revelries continued and intensified as Americans debated Texas annexation and hurtled toward war with Mexico. “The celebration on the Fourth was attended with more interest than we have witnessed for several years past,” the Western Citizen reported in 1845. On the eve of the Mexican War Kentuckians enjoyed large, boisterous parades with music and sermons. They celebrated each state in the Union with banners and signs, and Whigs venerated the schools and academies they hoped would help win the future for their progeny. Nationalism permeated both the church and the family and made the idea of America matter in deeply personal ways. The prominent role of both women and the church in commemorating American independence suggested nationalism’s deep social and cultural resonance.¹⁴

At the same time, partisanship often entered into such patriotic jubilees. “The celebration of the Sunday Schools of the city on the 4th at Maxwell’s Springs, was a splendid affair,” a Lexington newspaper noted in 1846. Local newspapers proudly reported that Whig ministers, local scholars, politicians, and laymen held forth on social, cultural, and political questions ranging from Texas annexation, to basic anatomy, benevolent reform, and the “godly” character of American liberty. Rarely did Whigs miss an opportunity to use the Fourth of July to promote their ideology as an orthodox vision of the nation’s future. In their view, America’s glorious past pointed to a bright future of moral development and personal growth. Independence Day offered Kentucky's Whigs the chance to celebrate the idea of America as they imagined it, and to share their hopes and anxieties with each other. More broadly, American nationalism provided a lens through which Kentuckians interpreted political and social events. A solemn sense of state and local pride also salted Kentuckians' understanding of their responsibilities to hearth and home. Before allowing their sons to leave for the war in Mexico, old men presented their sons with ornate swords and pistols, and admonished them to defend the martial honor of “Old Kentuck.” “True, faithful and brave,” one Covington editor described the volunteers in May 1846, “our countrymen constitute a never-failing bulwark of strength upon which the nation may always rely. Well may we be proud of the name of
Kentuckian.” Bourbon, Jefferson, Kenton, Fayette, and Madison County boys were told to remember their towns, farms, and families. Kentuckians considered themselves a peaceful people, but historically formidable on the battlefield. After all, proud Kentucky riflemen, popular legend held, had won the day for Andrew Jackson at New Orleans in 1815.15

Kentuckians, like most Americans, shared a nationalistic pride in their towns and counties on the eve of the Mexican War. But for Whigs, American nationalism and state pride played a central role in their political ethos. Whigs’ shared a sense of duty to the Revolutionary fathers and to the political, social, and cultural preservation of their legacy, not just in Kentucky but across the Ohio Valley. "We understand that portions will be called for from each state and territory," the Millersburg, Ohio, Holmes County Whig announced in 1846, "so that an opportunity will be afforded to all her gallant sons to participate in the defence of their country." Polk’s calculated rhetoric about “American blood, on American soil” appealed to Whigs’ patriotism and convinced people across the lower Middle West to go to war to defend American honor.16

Beyond the Fourth of July, George Washington also personified the civil religion of American nationalism. Washington’s memory welded emerging ideas concerning American national identity with a martial image of manhood that many Whig men both revered and sought to emulate. “The birthday of Washington, is full of cherished associations,” the Maysville Herald crowed in 1847, “the vindication of her rights, and the firm establishment of Republican freedom restored him to loved home, divested of power, and of the insignia of office, but elevated in the gratitude and affection of his fellow-citizens, as high above every other man, as is the mountain which is at once his monument and his grave, above the valley of the majestic river, which flows at its base.” For Whigs, Washington’s martial reputation provided a stark contrast to Polk’s oily aggrandizement.17

The United States of America was still a young nation in 1847, and no republican hero captured the public imagination like Washington. “But who is this coming, thus gloriously along, with masts towering to heaven, and his sails white, looming like the mountain of snows,” Parson Mason Weems described the national hero in his widely read biography. “Who is it but ‘Columbia’s first and greatest son!’ whose talents, like the sails of a mighty ship spread far and wide, catching the gales of heaven, while his capacious soul, stored the rich ballast of religion, remains firm and unshaken as the ponderous rock.” Who else, Americans asked with a flourish of youthful hubris, could match the classical fame of the Roman General Cincinnatus but George Washington? Not only did he fight and win American independence, but he also gave up his sword and went home after the Revolutionary War. No one questioned Washington’s character and for Americans in the 1840s his willingness to retire to Mount Vernon proved his measured statesmanship.18
Title page from M. L. Weems, The Life of George Washington; with Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honourable to Himself and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen (Philadelphia: Matthew Carey, 1810).

FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Before Polk made war on Mexico, Washington’s February 22 birthday provided one of the few martial outlets for expressing American nationalism. “The 22nd of February will be celebrated in Aberdeen by the Maysville Guards and American Rangers,” the Maysville Herald informed readers. “Chas. White Blair, Esq., will deliver an oration, on the occasion, at the Methodist Church. The citizens of Maysville, Aberdeen, and vicinity are respectfully invited to attend.” Throughout the 1840s, men, women, children, the elderly, and the infirm gathered in cities and towns across Kentucky to hear military and patriotic music accompanied by close-order drill and watch local militias marching in formation, all to honor the martial glory of the nation’s first president. Henry Clay believed that all Americans had a civic responsibility to celebrate Washington’s birth and recall his service to the nation. “Of all the men of whom history or tradition has preserved any account,” he wrote to a group of Philadelphia Whigs in 1844, “Washington, by common consent, deserves the greatest admiration.” For most Whigs, Washington personified the American love of country and measured will to fight for the nation.19

The American nationalism coursing through Independence Day celebrations and public reverence for Washington had a deep influence on Kentucky Whigs’ initial eagerness to fight in Mr. Polk’s War. Their political values helped them make sense of changing social and cultural conditions, including the rise of market capitalism and the moral debates over temperance and slavery. Yet nationalism and state pride, especially Washington’s martial example and the half-true local legends surrounding Kentucky riflemen at New Orleans in 1812, provided poignant lenses through which they interpreted events. “Not withstanding the difference of opinion which exists in regard to the manner in which the war has been brought on,” a Lexington editor observed, “a war emphatically of Executive procurement without the constitutional intervention of the Congress of the United States—still all are agreed that the time is not now to discuss these matters or to bring those upon whom rests the responsibility of the present state of things to their proper arraignment before the people.” The experiences, fears, trials, and triumphs of Kentucky’s sons on the distant plains of Mexico and the way their friends and neighbors imagined their service and groped to assign meaning to it reveals an agonized search for honor in a cause many doubted. Whigs’ longing for glory on the fields of battle was no momentary impulse but rather a cultural yearning to prove themselves as strong men and republican citizen-soldiers worthy of mention in the same breath as the great Washington. But glory came at a price that many did not foresee.20

A martial love of country, county, and home convinced many Kentucky Whigs to fight in Mexico. At the end of May 1846, Whig leaders asked the assembled men in Paris, Kentucky, bluntly, “Who would volunteer in the service of their country?” Whigs from all across the Ohio Valley faced a similar query. “Whatever diversity of opinion may have been entertained as to the manner of our becoming involved in a war,” Illinois Whigs admitted, “none existed in regard to our duty
when called...in defence of the just rights of our country.” It became a question of bald patriotism. Who among them had the guts and guile to stand and fight for the flag? In this context, waffling or dissent, no matter how principled, amounted to cowardice or treason. Garrett Davis might accurately argue that “James K. Polk is not the gallant army which he has precipitated into needless carnage and peril.” But that army needed money and men and many in Kentucky eagerly provided both. Indeed, many Kentucky Whigs also helped provide for the families of soldiers off fighting. During the first weeks of June 1846, women in Covington made uniforms for their sons, brothers, and husbands, while a group of businessmen raised more than two thousand dollars to support the families of local soldiers.  

Amid the excitement of mobilization, Kentuckians urged their soldiers to remember their proud history as they set off for war. “We shall record more fully hereafter...the result of the draft made upon the patriotism of the people [of Lexington],” a Whig editor promised. “It is enough to state now that the ancient reputation of this section of our State is not likely to suffer. Fayette Volunteers! Remember the history of the past, and be worthy of your immortal ancestry.” In this view, fighting in Mexico not only offered Kentuckians the opportunity to win glory in their own right, but also the obligation to live up to the military prowess of their fathers andgrandfathers who fought the British twice and won and kept independence. Many Kentuckians admired their soldiers as paragons of republican virtue and simplicity. “We...notice,” observers in Louisville added, “large numbers of proud, high-spirited, honorable young men—mechanics, clerks, lawyers, and doctors—who will, we pledge ourselves—if opportunity permits—add additional lustre and brilliancy to the proud name of Kentuckians!” These brave boys were not professional soldiers and their fellow citizens loved them for it. The governor summarized the views of many state residents when he wrote, “These men are the gallant sons of Kentucky.”  

The call of battle rang loud and true across the rolling hills of Kentucky. Young men poured down from the eastern mountains like a spring flood. Eager farm boys, mechanics, and merchants’ sons from the western piedmont crowded into Versailles, Lexington, Paris, Newport, Covington, and Louisville, ten thousand strong and with more on the way. They stayed awake for days at a time and packed town halls, churches, and even soggy pastures to hear patriotic speeches, songs, and sermons. A few brawls broke out between rival regiments racing to Frankfort to win a coveted spot in the army departing for Mexico. They cheered, sang, and drank Kentucky bourbon and believed their neighbors when they praised their valor and urged them on to glory. No one doubted or dismissed as hyperbole a Louisville newsman’s boast: “we can promise that they will never dishonor the proud escutcheon of Old Kentucky.” These Kentucky recruits valued honor above calculation and believed glory was theirs for the taking on the arid plains of distant Mexico.
The rising tide of nationalism and annual martial festivals honoring Washington and American independence helped fuel the wave of patriotic enthusiasm that swept many young Kentucky Whigs off to war. Martial swagger seemed so pervasive that one editor blustered, “there is something in the very air of Kentucky which makes a man a soldier.” A flood of men answered Governor William Owsley’s call for troops on May 22, 1846. In the decision to enlist, many felt the exhilaration of both defending national honor and confirming their manliness on the battlefield. All of Kentucky, it seemed, supported their boys in the waning days of May. “Good! Go [to] it!” one editor urged, “and we will
lay down our pen, throw up our hat, and give three cheers for noble old Kentucky. Our gallant state could, at twenty days notice, furnish enough Volunteers to flog Mexico in as many days more.” This was not empty rhetoric. The overwhelming response to the call for volunteers in the summer of 1846 shows how deep the call of promised glory ran in Kentucky.24

Owsley got more help than he needed that first year, as seventy-nine counties offered 105 companies for service in Mexico. Most of the units he accepted came from the Bluegrass region around Lexington or the urban areas around Cincinnati and Louisville. This reflected both political calculation and geographic proximity. The Bluegrass counties were closer and their troops answered the muster sooner than those in the western piedmont or eastern mountains. Beyond that, wartime appointments became rewards for political stalwarts. The call of battle cut across partisan lines but an inordinate number of Whigs won spots in the first troop requisition. Regardless of their feelings about the war’s aims, Whigs in central Kentucky were excited for their boys to serve. “If, however,” the Lexington Observer and Reporter argued in May, “the county of Fayette does not hold her head still more proudly by reason of the conduct of her gallant sons, who are to represent her on the Rio Grande, then we are no judge of men.” Many Whigs in Lexington urged employers to protect the jobs of prospective volunteers. “A correspondent suggested to us that there are at least 2,000 clerks in this city, of whom scarcely twenty have enlisted for the war against Mexico,” a Whig editor explained, “although there is as much spirit and patriotism among them as any other class in the city. The reason assigned for their apparent apathy, is their apprehension of losing situations which now pay them well, and the notorious difficulty of obtaining employment here in the fall.” Most merchants and businessmen gave these men assurances that their jobs would be waiting for them upon their return. For those men not selected, however, appeals to geography did nothing to salve the wounded pride. “Hundreds of brave men in this state, and particularly the Green River country,” the Louisville Daily Courier noted, “have been most grievously and bitterly disappointed because on account of the distance from Frankfort, they were not able to report to the Governor in time to be received.” Their failure to secure a place in the army headed toward the Texas border left many Kentucky men disappointed.25
The general air of revelry could not last. For the young men rushing to enlist in the summer of 1846 the siren hymn of glory ran deep, but it would soon confront the reality of battle. For their part, Kentucky Whigs left behind echoed the sentiments of their brethren across the Ohio Valley and began questioning Polk's motives in Mexico and their support of his war almost as soon as the last steamboat of volunteers departed for New Orleans. "When and where the Mexican War is to terminate," the Licking Valley Register wondered in August, "is now a question well deserving the calm consideration of the American people. How long is the public treasury to be drained, commerce and the internal business relations of the country stagnated, and the feverish excitement consequent upon a state of war, to continue?" Given Whigs' long-expressed reservations about wars for expansion the wonder is not that the rumblings of dissent rose so quickly but that so many ignored their moral doubts and marched off for Mexico at all. Some conceded that men might gain honor on the field of battle, but doubted whether the Polk administration's handling of the war would make that possible. "War, at best, is but a poor business," the Lexington Observer and Reporter grimly reminded readers, "but it has something fascinating and glorious in it, when rightly conducted. Yet we can see nothing about this war since the 8th and 9th of May, to inspire any other sentiment than that of unmitigated disgust." Whigs objected to spending American blood and treasure in a war whose objectives and goals appeared ill defined at best.26

Whigs in Kentucky understood they had to limit their dissent or they would open themselves to the charge of not supporting Kentucky boys at war. Yet as the conflict stretched into the winter of 1846-1847, their consternation grew. "But from all we can gather, from all the signs floating on the surface of public affairs," a Covington editor dourly warned readers, "we are led to believe that it is the design of our rulers at Washington to make the present war one of Conquest, looking toward vast military operations, the dismemberment of the Mexican republic, and the annexation to this country of the whole of the Northern Provinces of that unfortunate country." By early 1847, Whigs across the Ohio Valley expressed similar reservations. "The question is not now whether we unjustly or wrongfully embarked in this war," an Illinois Whig editor fumed, "for that the President and his party, and those who indirectly aided that party, are responsible, but the question is,—shall we withdraw from the contest, disgrace ourselves in our own eyes, and make our nation the laughingstock of the world, or use all the energies and power of the nation in bringing the contest to a speedy and honorable termination." Whigs could not admit that they had "indirectly aided" Mr. Polk's war; their ideological dilemma deepened as the war progressed and many came to see that supporting the troops would lead to territorial expansion.27
Without a doubt, the most famous soldier to serve in Mexico was Zachary Taylor. Whigs and Democrats across Kentucky and the West played on Taylor’s ties to the state and section and hoped to recruit him to their respective political standards. Yet no one captured the imaginations of Kentuckians like Henry Clay Jr. Born in April 1811, the seventh child of Kentucky’s revered senator, the younger Clay was tall and handsome like his father and spent most of his short life trying to please him. Like many young Whigs across Kentucky, a sense of duty, political opportunity, the pursuit of adventure, and the chance to step outside his father’s long shadow combined to convince Clay Jr. to volunteer for service in Mexico. In those respects, he represented the martial and nationalist aspirations of young Whiggish men from all across the Ohio Valley. The elder Clay gave his son a brace of pistols for use in military service. Clay Jr.’s sense of duty permeated his correspondence with his children. “I trust that I shall always have good accounts of you,” he wrote to his son in June 1846. “You should remember that as the oldest of my family your example will have a great influence on the others.” Whatever he believed about the Mexican War’s aims or conduct, the younger Clay remained dedicated to his men, their welfare, and the chance to win glory. But Clay’s service in Mexico, like that of his fellow Kentuckians, was disease-ridden and forgettable until February 1847 when Santa Anna marched north with twenty thousand men to fight Zachary Taylor’s little army near the village of Buena Vista. There, Kentucky’s volunteers carved out a place of honor and young Clay became a martyr of the Whigs’ moral and political compromises.  

In the early dawn hours of February 22, 1847, just a little over a mile south of Buena Vista, an advance guard of Mexican cavalry presented themselves before the entrenched American position near the clutch of twisting arroyos and jutting plateaus that protected the mountain pass. Santa Anna meant to fight and Zachary Taylor would oblige him. Buena Vista quickly became a rolling series of small, hot exchanges that often had little to do with either general’s broad strategy. Santa Anna pursued the initiative, while Taylor strove to hold his position and counter the Mexican assaults. For two desperate days, the American and Mexican armies grappled for mastery of the Sierra Madre heights. Although both generals suspected they had fought a tactical draw, when the smoke cleared on February 23, Taylor’s volunteers and regulars still held the ground.
Reports of the battle from northern Mexico did not trickle into the Ohio Valley until nearly a month after the guns fell silent. By early March 1847, Whigs across the state met the news of victory with somber pride. “We do rejoice in that triumph,” a Whig editor noted in Shelbyville, “but that rejoicing is deeply intermingled with bitter grief at the other results of the battle, and sincerely do we sympathize and mourn with the relatives and friends of those who have fallen on the terribly bloody field of Buena Vista.” The loss of men and the moral ambiguities of the war itself tempered the satisfaction most Kentuckians took in the victory at Buena Vista. County courts and many businesses across the state closed to honor the dead. “Kentucky will be shrouded in mourning,” a Maysville Whig editor solemnly reminded readers, “the hot tears of her sires and sons, of her mothers and maids—of her whole people, will descend in showers upon the graves of her lost sons, fallen gloriously on the field of battle.”

Antonio López de Santa Anna (1794-1876) from General Taylor’s Life, Battles, and Despatches [sic] (Philadelphia: T. C. Clarke, 1847). CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER
In their search for culprits, Whigs in Covington began to look again at the war’s beginnings. Whig editors mined the speeches of Missouri Democrat Thomas Hart Benton to answer the rhetorical question, “Does Texas extend to the Rio Grande?” “With respect to Texas,” Benton “replies,” “I consider her destiny fixed. But I wash my hands of all attempts to dismember the Mexican Republic by seizing her dominions in New Mexico, Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas. The treaty, in all that relates to the boundary of the Rio Grande, is an unparalleled outrage on Mexico.” In skewering Benton with his own words, Kentucky Whigs remained silent about their own culpability. “With no definite object in view, with the heart of the country warmly enlisted in opposition to the continuance of the war,” a Lexington editor raged futilely, “the issue of which is to confer no positive benefits upon the country, it is greatly to be desired that peace may be speedily secured and this wanton waste of human life be arrested.” But how would the country attain peace? With ill-defined war aims, securing a peace seemed remote and elusive. “Let the correspondence between President Polk and Santa Anna,” a group of Whigs wryly suggested in northern Kentucky, “be published, and…they will both be hung in 24 hours from the time of its publication in each country, and peace may be made immediately.” By the time Chapultepec fell in September 1847, Kentucky Whigs’ hatred of Polk and the dizzy pace of the war blinded them to their share of the blame for its outcome.

Henry Clay harbored no such illusions. A veteran of nearly forty years of political combat, Clay had just about seen it all. The loss of his namesake in February gave him occasion for somber reflection and on a cold, rainy day in early November, Clay spoke to a gathering in Lexington. “The day is dark and gloomy,” he began,
“unsettled and uncertain, like the condition of the country, in regard to the unnatural war with Mexico.” The great Kentucky statesman had saved the Union twice before and would do so again in less than three years, but he stood before his friends and neighbors as an old man humbled by time and experience. “In the progress of years,” Clay noted, “my spring time has gone by, and I too am in the autumn of life, and feel the frost of age.” His purpose was simple and profound. Clay sought the chance to speak “seriously and plainly” on the momentous question of the day: the likely consequences of the conquest of Mexico.32

What would happen, Clay wondered, to the United States if all or part of Mexico fell to American arms? “Murmurs, discontent, insurrections, [and] rebellion, would inevitably ensue,” he prophesied, “until the incompatible parts would be broken asunder, and possibly in the frightful struggle, our present glorious Union itself would be dissevered or dissolved.” Clay harbored no doubts about the morality of the conflict any longer. “It is Mexico,” he reminded the crowd, “that is defending her firesides, her castles, and her altars, not we.” And where did the ultimate blame for these grim omens lie? Whose failure to bend their conduct to their principles helped plunge the nation on this disastrous course? Clay abjured haranguing Polk and the Democrats; he recognized that they had done what they promised in the last election. But what, Clay asked, had the Whigs done? “Far from interposing any obstacles to the prosecution of the war,” he reminded his audience, “if the Whigs are reproachable at all, it is for having lent too ready a facility to it, without careful examination into the objects of the war. And, out of office, who have rushed to the prosecution of the war with more ardor and alacrity than the Whigs?” If he held the Democrats guilty of artless, political cunning, he accused the Whigs of base hypocrisy.33

Clay was correct, but he told more than he knew. Whigs had not acted as unprincipled political cowards who stared into the abyss of war and blinked. Potent nationalism and the desire for martial glory had clouded their judgment and obscured their perspective. During the 1844 presidential election in his “Alabama Letters,” Clay himself had dubiously clarified his position on Texas and expansion. He would “be glad,” Clay declared on that occasion, “to see” the annexation of Texas “without dishonor, without war, and with the common consent of the Union, and upon fair and just terms.” Across the Ohio River, Abraham Lincoln paid a steep political price for answering the Whig dilemma with dissent. He took the moral high ground in February 1848 when he explained to his law partner William Herndon that to “allow the President to invade a neighboring nation whenever he shall deem it necessary to repel an invasion, and you allow him to do so, whenever he may choose to say he deems it necessary for such purpose—and you allow him to make war at pleasure.” But Lincoln came to this position late, faced vilification for it by friend and foe alike in Illinois, and buried himself in his legal practice until 1854.34
From the top of the party down and across the Ohio Valley, Whig attempts to separate their support for the American troops from their loathing of territorial conquest created a difficult dilemma. Moreover, the memory of the Federalists’ failed dissent during the War of 1812 loomed over any Whig opposition. Most important, Kentuckians boisterously celebrated American independence and dreamed of winning glory on the field of battle like Revolutionary War heroes such as George Washington. Many young Kentucky Whigs like Henry Clay Jr. set off for Mexico in pursuit of martial honor, but found that glory brought with it death. The political fortunes of the Whigs suffered a similar fate. Whigs’ qualified support for the Mexican War proved not so much a failure of dissent as a loss of ideology and political identity.35

The American celebration of martial ardor drove the Whigs’ selection of William Henry Harrison before the war and Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott after it. Having a general at the top of the ticket, Whigs believed, promised electoral victory. But in their myopic pursuit of elective office, many Whigs forgot that their party had been built on checking the abuses of executive power by General Andrew Jackson. Worse, neither Harrison nor Taylor lived long enough to help carry out any significant portion of the Whigs’ social and cultural platform. By the time they nominated Scott, their particular moral and social vision for American development had become mired in the mud of the territorial question. Where was a new Bank of the United States? Where was federal support for internal improvements? Could Whigs make honest political or ethical arguments for development over time when they marched so lustily to war for territory? The failure to answer their dilemma of dissent shattered their moral vision for American development. And they had little to show for their betrayal of principle in Mexico except a broken party in eight years and a broken country in twelve. But no one could see such consequences in 1848.

Indeed, the astounding successes of American arms in Mexico compounded Whigs’ loss of ideological mooring. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed on February 2, 1848, added to the United States over nine hundred thousand square miles of territory, including all or part of the present-day states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Nevada, and Wyoming, and set the Texas border at the Rio Grande. California proved the sweetest prize. The United States became a two-ocean power, with access to potentially rich markets in Asia. Moreover, on January 24, 1848, well before the war formally ended, James W. Marshall found gold at Sutter’s Mill in Coloma. The ensuing gold rush brought tens of thousands of people to California and fueled the expansion of industries and railroads across the newly won American West.36

These seemingly glittering opportunities left Whigs in an untenable position. In the short term, Whigs turned Mexico into a powerful if ironic club that in 1848 they wielded to win the presidency with Taylor and strengthen their opposition in the Senate. In Kentucky, they remained strong, retaining control of the General
Assembly and electing John J. Crittenden governor. Nevertheless, storm clouds loomed on the horizon. Taylor’s nomination, and his hazy stance on most Whig political principles, drove many Whigs to question their party’s leadership. But their doubts went deeper still. As Clay had foreseen, the addition of vast territories raised questions that most Americans were not prepared to answer. Whigs’ failure to stem the tide of expansionism left them arguing political questions on the Democrats’ terms. By 1848, territorial expansion no longer remained a political or moral proposition, but had become an established fact. The American people, North and South, no longer grappled with the idea of expansion but instead with its immediate and long-term consequences. The most pressing debates centered on the organization of the territories and the place of slavery or free labor in their settlement.

Yet deeper questions remained. The Whig ideology that informed their political agenda celebrated development over time, not space. The country, Whigs’ believed, would improve through investment in transportation and communication and the prayerful attention to education, charity, and care for the infirm and insane. Novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne might have described any number of Whigs when he wrote, “No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true.” In the heady lust for war, Whigs forgot their true face and lost their party and themselves in the process. They did not fear the future until the Mexican War shifted the parameters of the debate and they failed to meet the crisis they helped create. In Kentucky and in other Midwest states, nationalism and a martial thirst for glory led Whigs to war, but neither offered sound political prospects for the party or sure ideological footing for Whiggery to win the ultimate prize: the future. Whigs betrayed their convictions in Mexico and wrung their hands in vain as first their party and then the nation disintegrated into bitter sectional discord and outright civil war.37

2 Clay lost the national race by less than forty thousand votes out of nearly three million cast. Further, he lost the critical state of New York by a mere 5,106 votes. See “1844 Presidential Election,” The American Presidency Project, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1844 (accessed Feb. 21, 2011). For more on the consequences of Clay’s defeat, see Gary J. Kornblith, “Rethinking the Coming of the Civil War: A Counterfactual Exercise,” Journal of American History 90 (June 2003), 77. Lexington Observer and Reporter (Ky.), June 1, 1844, Feb. 11, Dec. 31, 1845. For similar rhetoric across Kentucky, see Licking Valley Register (Covington, Ky.), May 7, 29, 1845, and Western Citizen (Paris, Ky.), Feb. 6, 1846. The sentiment was echoed in Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois; see, for example, Indiana State Journal (Indianapolis), May 13, 20, 1846; Sangamon Journal (Springfield, Ill.), May 7, 1846; and Holmes County Whig (Millersburg, Oh.), May 16, 1846.

3 “Speech of Mr. [Garrett] Davis, of Kentucky,” May 11, 1846, Congressional Globe, House of Representatives, 29th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: Blair and Rives, 1846). See U.S. House Journal, 29th Cong., 1st sess., May 11, July 16, 1846; and U.S. Senate Journal, 29th Cong., 1st sess., July 17, 1846. Although addressing a different question from the “justice” of the war’s beginnings or subsequent conduct, Kentucky’s congressional Whigs also voted unanimously against the Wilmot Proviso in December 1845. For more on this point, see, for example, Holmes County Whig (Millersburg, Oh.), May 16, 1846.


5 This view is most powerfully argued in Daniel Walker Howe, What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).


9 Licking Valley Register (Covington, Ky.), Mar. 22, 29, 1845. For similar rhetoric from across Kentucky, see Lexington Observer and Reporter (Ky.), Jan. 25, 1845, Feb. 28, Mar. 11, 1846; Western Citizen (Paris, Ky.), Aug., 22, 1845; Kentucky
Yeomen (Frankfort), Dec. 4, 18, 1845. For a provocative look at Whig notions of development over time versus space, see Major L. Wilson, Space, Time, and Freedom: The Quest for Nationality and the Irresistible Conflict, 1815-1861 (Westwood, Ct.: Greenwood Publishing, 1974).


12 Licking Valley Register (Covington, Ky.), May 30, June 6, 1846 (quote). See also Louisville Daily Courier, May 16, 20, 1846; Lexington Observer and Reporter (Ky.), May 20, 23, 1846; Tri-Weekly Herald (Maysville, Ky.), May 30, 1846. For more on Kentucky’s response to the Mexican war, see Damon Eubank, The Response of Kentucky to the Mexican War, 1846-1848 (Lexington, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 2004). For evidence of the Illinois Whigs’ support for the war and the widespread enthusiasm across the Midwest, see Sangamon Journal (Springfield, Il.), June 4, 11, 18, July 2, 1846; Indiana State Journal (Indianapolis), May 20, 30, June 17, 1846; Holmes County Whig (Millingburg, Oh.), June 6, 13, 27, 1846.


14 “Anniversary of Independence,” Broadside 215, Lexington, Ky., July 2, 1844, and “Ladies Fair!” Broadside 225, Lexington, Ky., July 2, 1845. See also Sangamon Journal (Springfield, Il.), July 2, 1846; Holmes County Whig (Millingburg, Oh.), June 6, 13, 1846. A number of wealthy businessmen in Louisville also raised fifty thousand dollars to help the state fund her troops in Mexico.

15 Licking Valley Register (Covington, Ky.), May 23, June 6, 1846.

16 Lexington Observer and Reporter (Ky.), July 8, 1846; Licking Valley Register (Covington, Ky.), July 11, 1846; Louisville Daily Democrat, July 7, 1846; Holmes County Whig (Millingburg, Oh.), May 16, June 6, 13, 1846. See also Sangamon Journal (Springfield, Il.), June 11, July 2, 1846; Indiana State Journal (Indianapolis), May 20, 1846. See Holt, Political Parties, 261.


22 Lexington Observer and Reporter (Ky.), May 23, 30, 1846; Louisville Courier, May 20, 1846. See also Western Citizen (Paris, Ky.), May 29, 1846.


24 Western Citizen (Paris, Ky.), June 5, 1846; Diary of Private William H. Daniel, June 4, 1846, Filson Historical Society, Louisville (hereafter FHS); Louisville Daily Courier, May 25, 1846.


26 Licking Valley Register (Covington, Ky.), Aug. 1, 1846; Lexington Observer and Reporter (Ky.), Sept. 19, 1846.

27 Licking Valley Register (Covington, Ky.), July 11, Aug. 1, 27, 1846; Western Citizen (Paris, Ky.), July 10, 1846; Sangamon Journal (Springfield, Ill.), Nov. 5, 1846; Indiana State Journal (Indianapolis), Oct. 5, 1846; Holmes County Whig (MILLEDsburg, Oh.), Oct. 31, Nov. 28, 1846.


30 George Wilkins Kendall and Carl Nebel, The War Between the United States and Mexico, Illustrated (1851; Austin: Texas Historical Association, 1994); Lexington Observer and Reporter (Ky.), Mar. 31, Apr. 3, 1847; Shelbyville News (Ky.), Mar. 31, 1847; Maysvile Herald (Ky.), Mar. 31, 1847; Licking Valley Register (Covington, Ky.), Apr. 3, 1847.


SUMMER 2012 47
The Battle for the Border
State Soul  The Slavery Debate in the
Churches of the Border Region

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In the approximately half-century from the births of Jefferson Davis in 1808 and Abraham Lincoln in 1809 down to the Civil War, the nation underwent a major debate over moral questions concerning slavery. As a consequence of several decades of angry disputing, the majority of northerners and southerners adopted very different attitudes toward slavery. The sectional division over the morality of slavery actually proved highly imprecise, however, as the following survey of the positions of the religious institutions on the “border” of slave and free states reveals. This brief study examines four major themes: first, the moral standing of slavery in the early nineteenth-century border state churches; second, the response of those churches to the debate launched in the 1830s between abolitionist and proslavery militants; third, the impact of the well-known sectional schisms of many national denominations on border state religious life; and fourth, the influence of border state churches on the political debate over slavery in the 1850s and the decision of the Deep South to secede.

The antebellum border states stretched from the Chesapeake Bay region westward along the Mason-Dixon Line and the Ohio River and then westward to include Missouri. The analysis will focus on the behavior the principle religious denominations in the Border South states of Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri and their immediate northern neighbors of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. The Methodists, Baptists, and Roman Catholics are examined because of their membership size; the Quakers because of their historical role in the slavery debate; and the Protestant Episcopal Church because of its long history in the Chesapeake Bay region. The Presbyterians and Disciples of Christ are included because of their regional prominence in the western border states, while on similar grounds denominations found in small numbers in the region such as the Freewill Baptists, Congregationalists, Unitarians, and Universalists are omitted.

Because of the unfree status of most antebellum African Americans, the slavery debate affected them in unique ways. Blacks worshipped in major national denominations, in a number of their own independent denominations and congregations, and also in what Albert Raboteau labels “the invisible institution”—that is,
Robert J. Breckinridge, *The Black Race... A discourse delivered before The Kentucky Colonization Society, February 6, 1851* (Frankfort, Ky.: A. G. Hodges, 1851).
black religion practiced under slavery without white supervision. Across the border states these African American Christians had an important impact on decisions regarding slavery made by many denominations. The recent insights of historians such as Charles F. Irons reveal that slaves in both denominations and the “invisible” church influenced white coreligionists’ attitudes toward slavery. Therefore, the impact of black Christians on border state slavery debates will be acknowledged when possible.

Antebellum border state churches differed substantially on doctrinal questions concerning free will and individual conscience, on the amount of lay versus ecclesiastical control in church government, and in the ethnic and interregional distribution of membership. Attempts to generalize the attitude of any denomination therefore require a preemptory acknowledgment that on account of the great geographic and theological diversity of the antebellum border states exceptional individuals and congregations existed that failed to conform to broader patterns.

I. Border State Churches and the Morality of Slavery

Historians have long had interest in the subject of the evolving attitude of the American church toward slavery. Despite considerable differences in theology, polity, and demographic makeup, colonial-era border state churches, with the exception of the Quakers and a few other pietistic sects, treated slavery with moral ambivalence coupled with a pragmatic recognition of the economic need for the institution. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, however, the wide acceptance of Enlightenment concepts regarding natural rights and human liberty raised questions about the consistency of slavery and fundamental tenets of republican government. The First Great Awakening and subsequent revival waves during the immediate post-Revolution years fostered a powerful sense of egalitarian community among believers, which encouraged many white churchgoers to question the enslavement of their black coreligionists. As a consequence of these secular and religious forces, rapidly growing evangelical denominations such as the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, which had experienced the greatest success in recruiting blacks into their ranks, incorporated condemnations of slaveholding into their disciplines during the twenty years following the Revolution.

This early burst of antislavery vigor in the churches began to wane in the early nineteenth century, however, as slavery regained its economic health after stagnating during and following the Revolution and as white concerns about the future role of free blacks increased. Few denominations thereafter stringently enforced their disciplinary actions against slave owning members. As the following survey of border state denominations indicates, with a few exceptions, what remained by the 1820s of the region’s church-based antislavery sentiment concentrated on advocacy for ameliorative programs such as missionary work among the slaves, voluntary manumission, and African colonization.
Post-Revolutionary antislavery sentiment had its greatest impact in the border states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. In Pennsylvania, a coalition of Quakers, religious liberals including Benjamin Franklin, and allies from the young evangelical denominations successfully lobbied the legislature to pass a gradual abolition act for the state in 1780. Profitable economic ties to the slaveholding South and racism that grew along with the number of free blacks in the population soon produced a waning of northern antislavery sentiment. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society in subsequent decades had to struggle to protect the rights of the state’s black citizens. In neighboring New Jersey, it took until 1804 for Quakers and antislavery evangelicals to win passage of a measure that abolished slavery extremely gradually. In the antebellum era, New Jersey never granted black residents full rights and after a fractious struggle Pennsylvania withdrew suffrage from black males in 1838.6

Religious antislavery groups played a leading role in promoting gradual emancipation movements in the Chesapeake Bay states of Virginia and Maryland. Voluntary manumissions greatly increased in Maryland after the Revolution as the tobacco economy stagnated. Maryland Quakers such as Thomas Ellicott and evangelical ministers such as Methodist Joseph Nichols conducted petition drives for gradual abolition and supported antislavery candidates in the immediate post-Revolution decades. The rise of the colonization moment, however, gradually eclipsed popular support for stronger antislavery action. Maryland appropriated tax monies toward the cause of colonizing its burgeoning free black population back to Africa. In Virginia, a few Presbyterian ministers, such as James O’Kelly, joined a coalition of tidewater Quakers and antislavery Methodists in campaigning for gradual emancipation after the Revolution. This movement had little impact except briefly following Nat Turner’s Southampton slave uprising when the Virginia legislature debated but then rejected gradual emancipation proposals. While pockets of religious antislavery sentiment persisted in the Chesapeake Bay states, the region’s churches would not support an effective move against the peculiar institution.7

In the new southern state of Kentucky and the trans-Appalachian counties of Virginia, slaveholders never established as solid a grasp over economic or political institutions as in the Chesapeake Bay region. The revival wave at the nineteenth century’s start shaped the churches of the western states far more strongly than the East Coast religious establishment. Evangelically oriented Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians comprised over 90 percent of the West’s churchgoers. As a consequence, antislavery sentiment from the Revolutionary era lingered far longer in the region. Many antislavery religious leaders in Kentucky, for example, strongly supported colonization and gradual emancipation plans down to the time of the Civil War. In 1808, the Western Methodist Conference ordered the expulsion of all members who sold slaves for “speculative motives” and the Kentucky Conference continued until after 1839 to order its ministers to free
any slaves gained through inheritance. While most of the region’s associations of Baptist congregations declined, in the words of Kentucky’s Elkhorn Association, to “meddle with emancipation from slavery or any other political subject,” prominent ministers such as David Barrow and Carter Tarrant remained uncompromising foes of slavery in the region. Scots-Irish Presbyterian immigrants who settled primarily in the Appalachian regions of the border states founded their own Presbyterian Church soon after the Revolution’s end. The new denomination adopted a highly structured church government of sessions, presbyteries, synods, and general assemblies that outlined procedures to expel unrepentant sinners from its communion. Influenced by post-Revolutionary antislavery sentiment, the denomination’s 1818 General Assembly, with the strong support of presbyteries in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky, declared slave owning “utterly inconsistent with the law of God.” The absence of any accompanying disciplinary action, however, effectively nullified that condemnation.

New settlers quickly occupied the territory north of the Ohio River after the American Revolution. New Englanders and middle state migrants transplanted their religious institutions and antislavery sentiments to the northern and central portions of the new states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. In the area of these states immediately adjacent to the slave states, however, those migrants from the South who comprised much of the membership of the Methodists, Baptists, Disciples, and several other denominations retained strong anti-black and proslavery sentiments. Despite the presence of some exceptional antislavery groups and individuals among these “Butternut” Midwesterners, most resisted any church action to impugn the morality of slaveholding. In addition to these native southerners, many Midwestern clergymen had been educated with slave owners in colleges and seminaries and had taught or preached in the slave states at some point in their careers. As a result, they balked at blanket condemnations of their acquaintances. Throughout the border state region, north as well as south of the Mason-Dixon line, church leaders in the early nineteenth century learned that denominational acceptance and membership growth would require acquiescence to the existence of slavery.

**II. Border State Churches Respond to Abolitionism**

The immediate emancipation movement that arose in the 1830s therefore came into conflict with the toleration of slavery in the vast majority of border state churches. Heavily influenced by contemporary evangelical trends, the immediate abolitionists condemned slaveholding as a personal sin and stressed that true repentance required instant voluntary renunciation of the practice. Because they regarded slave owning as sinful, abolitionists argued that the churches must subject it to the same disciplinary action as intemperance, adultery, theft, and other immoral practices. Immediateists hoped they could reach slaveholders’ consciences
if threatened with the moral odium of ejection from the religious community. Early abolitionists believed that once the denominations had adopted strict anti-slavery church disciplines, slave masters would capitulate to their opponents’ superior moral power and voluntarily manumit their slaves. While not immune from the pervasive racism of the era, white abolitionists also recognized that slavery received moral support from such prejudice, and they lobbied to overturn the churches’ racially discriminatory practices.

During the 1830s, abolitionists tried to reach and convert a mass audience. The American Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1833, attracted tens of thousands of members with lecturing agents, petition drives, and a wide variety of printed materials. Condemning slavery on moral grounds, abolitionists pursued immediate emancipation through moral suasion. Individual slaveholders and national religious institutions—the chief targets of moral suasion—largely rejected abolitionist appeals. They tried to suppress antislavery agitation by barring abolitionists’ access to the pulpit and public meeting houses and by mob violence. Throughout the border states in the 1830s, Methodist bishops banished abolitionist ministers to the least desirable circuits or suspended their preaching duties altogether. The Philadelphia-based Baptist General Tract Society required its agents to pledge not to enter the slavery debate. The ecclesiastical opposition to abolition stretched far beyond the border region. One historian has recently concluded “that in the 1830s, many, perhaps most, northern white ministers were opposed to the abolitionist movement, viewing it as disruptive, divisive, and radical.”

**Rise of Proslavery**

In an attempt to deflect the abolitionists’ moral indictments, southern ministers began to proclaim slavery a divinely ordained, biblically sanctioned institution. They cited biblical stories of the curse of Ham and the punishment of Cain to show God’s approval for the enslavement of a condemned race. It became popular in the South’s defense of slavery to dismiss the abolitionists as infidels and heretics who perverted all religious principles in their emancipation campaign. The rise of an aggressive religious defense of slave owning challenged the churches’ traditional stance toward slavery almost as much as abolitionism.

The decline of Revolutionary era antislavery sentiment followed by the dispute between the abolitionists and slavery’s southern religious defenders would have a heavy impact on border state churches. Many in the border region initially attempted to suppress the abolitionists or at least contain the disruptive impact of the slavery dispute upon the cooperation of northerners and southerners in church affairs. At the same time, many of the region’s church leaders rejected proslaveryism and stood by their traditional moral objections to slavery. The interplay of such factors as history, theology, polity, and demographics governed how much this quarrel over the moral standing of slavery affected the various border state denominations.
The Society of Friends and the Dilemma of Abolitionism

While questioning slave owning inside the Society of Friends dated to the 1670s, it took decades of lobbying by reformers like Anthony Benezet and John Woolman and the influence of both the Enlightenment and the Revolution to move the various annual Quaker meetings, the last being Virginia in 1784, to deny membership to slaveholders. In states from North Carolina to Massachusetts, Quakers became active in the gradual emancipation movement in the Revolutionary era and many later endorsed the colonization cause. Quaker voices in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and other places in the border states also loudly but unsuccessfully protested the admission of Missouri as a slave state.13

Quaker prominence in the unsuccessful campaigns to promote gradual emancipation in states such as Virginia fanned resentment among southern whites and helped spark the “Great Migration” during which more than 60 percent of southern Quakers migrated to the Midwest between 1810 and 1835. A few thousand Quakers remained in the Border South and continued their quiet personal testimony against slavery through activities such as the free produce movement boycotting slave-produced goods. One vocal exception, Samuel M. Janney from northern Virginia, wrote numerous articles for his state’s press from the 1820s into the Civil War, demonstrating the economic superiority of free labor. Janney also campaigned on behalf of amelioration programs such as lifting legal bans on educating slaves. Other southern border state Quakers such as Thomas Garrett of Delaware labored to undermine slavery by playing active roles in the Underground Railroad.14

Quakers north of the border with slavery also experienced difficulty in maintaining their moral testimony against slavery. Because of their pietistic heritage, the Quaker meetings remained deeply concerned about their members’ involvement in the public sphere of voluntary associations, especially morally oriented ones. In the 1820s, the Society of Friends suffered a wrenching schism, dividing into Hicksite and Orthodox factions because of theological differences, personality conflicts, and concerns about growing worldliness among Friends. The prominent participation of some Quakers in the modern abolitionist movement alongside many militantly evangelical Protestants worried many meetings. The wave of anti-abolitionist mobbings in the mid-1830s and opposition charges that abolitionism incited slave insurrection also troubled the pacifist Quaker leadership.15

By the early 1840s, Quaker meetings of both Hicksite and Orthodox inclination began admonishing members to withdraw from abolition societies. There followed the expulsion or resignation of scores of committed Quaker abolitionists in the border states. Pennsylvania Hicksites, for example, expelled over thirty abolitionists from their meetings during the 1830s and 1840s. The most famous incident of Quaker anti-abolitionism occurred in Indiana in 1842. After a delegation of local Quakers publicly confronted Kentucky Whig politician Henry Clay with a petition that he manumit his own slaves, the state’s annual meeting...
expelled eight abolitionist members. Within a few years, about a tenth of the state’s twenty-five thousand Quakers had seceded and formed their own Indiana Annual Meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends. This group actively supported antislavery politics, and members like Levi Coffin publicly assisted the Underground Railroad. More revealing of the culture of most border state churches, approximately 90 percent of Indiana’s Quakers formally distanced their denomination from abolitionism. Some of these Quakers continued to support colonization, a popular cause in highly racist Indiana, or patronize free produce establishments, but their meetings simultaneously censured those who voted for the abolition Liberty Party and cautioned against breaking laws to aid fugitive slaves.16

The example of the Quakers reveals the serious obstacles confronting churches that embraced abolitionism along both sides of the border. It explains why northern Quakers, despite possessing the longest antislavery record of any American church, had so little positive influence on other religious denominations considering endorsing abolitionism. To their credit, however, a brave band of Quakers managed to maintain an example of moderate antislavery testimony in the Border South states.

Episcopalian, Roman Catholics, and Lutherans Choose Silence
The border states’ three major liturgical denominations—the Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, and Lutheran churches—all successfully avoided divisive debates over slavery. The Episcopalians had been among the largest denominations in the border states at the end of the Revolution, especially in the Chesapeake Bay region. The Episcopalians’ rejection of evangelicalism contributed to the stagnation of the denomination’s membership in the East and the church failed to spread westward in large numbers. Like other liturgical or sacerdotal faiths, the Episcopalians’ emphasis on assent to formal doctrine, traditional confessions, and ritual observances did not encourage moral reform movements like abolitionism with their evangelically inspired tests of righteous behavior. In Maryland and Virginia, the Episcopalians also remained an elite denomination whose upper-class membership felt little attraction to social reform. When the abolitionist agitation began, this combination of theological and socioeconomic factors led Episcopal leaders to declare slavery a secular matter and therefore an improper subject for ecclesiastical legislation. Episcopalian bishops wielded their considerable powers to keep all discussion of the potentially disruptive slavery question out of church sessions. Those individual antislavery and proslavery militants in Episcopal ranks in both the Border North and South, failed to move their church explicitly toward a new official position before the Civil War.17

While the Roman Catholic Church had deep roots in Maryland and in some Midwestern pockets originally settled by the French, the church in the antebellum era drew its major strength among the burgeoning immigrant population.
Historians have long noted that the border states’ Irish and German Catholic population, frequently victims of evangelicals’ nativism, became political allies to the proslavery Democratic Party. However, theology rather than politics seems to have been more influential in shaping the church’s position toward slavery. Dating back to Roman times, Catholic doctrine had never challenged slavery as contrary to natural law. The Catholic Church in the Border South insisted its members safeguard the health, marriages, family life of the enslaved, but the church never impeached the morality of slave owning. When American Catholics held their first national plenary council in Baltimore in 1852, the prelates studiously avoided all discussion of slavery, abolition, or the sectional controversy.\(^{18}\) Surrounded by Protestants angrily debating slavery, Catholics scrupulously maintained official silence on the matter.

The Lutheran General Synod also rejected discussion of abolition in its councils as an exclusively secular question but inconsistently issued public endorsements of the colonization program in the 1830s. The Baltimore-based Lutheran Observer assured its readers that it would never “agitate the turbid and muddy stream of abolition or slavery.” While some Ohio Lutheran congregations endorsed abolition and broke from the general synod, the denomination in the border states and nationally continued to accept slave owners in their fellowship. Only during the Civil War did northern Lutherans endorse emancipation but even then recommended government compensation to the owners.\(^{19}\)

Theology and polity had steered the liturgical churches of the border states into an institutional silence that ostensibly implied neutrality on the abolitionist issue. As historian C. C. Goen wisely observes, however, this was a neutrality that “acquiesced in the South’s refusal to permit any discussion of slavery.”\(^{20}\) While the Episcopalians, Catholics, and Lutherans escaped the divisive impact of the slavery debate, most of the remaining denominations in the border states did not.

**III. Evangelical Church Schisms and Non-Schisms**

Years of debate in religious circles enflamed by the abolitionists’ impeachment of the moral standing of slaveholding produced a number of sectional divisions among churches in the 1840s and 1850s that significantly impacted the religious life of the border state region. Contemporary politicians such as Henry Clay and Daniel Webster bemoaned the church schisms as ominous portents for the political system, while southern leader John C. Calhoun not surprisingly viewed developments with more equanimity. Historians generally have endorsed these appraisals on the grave nature of the schisms. For example, H. Shelton Smith contends that “ecclesiastical division not only foreshadowed political disunion, but prepared the moral ground for it.” Yet this represents no unanimous opinion. As an earlier historian of the Methodist schism, Donald G. Mathews, concludes, church divisions “neither portended that war nor snapped a ‘bond’
of union.” This study supports Mathews’s appraisal that the highly publicized church schisms had far less impact on the growth of sectionalism in the border state region than either contemporaries or modern-day scholars assumed. First, many of the more popular religious institutions in the border states did not divide along sectional lines before the Civil War. Second, the denominations that divided did so in such an imprecise manner that they left numerous Border South churchgoers retaining affiliations with northern co-religionists.

The Presbyterians Divide and then Divide Again

The 1801 Plan of Union, which committed the Presbyterians to close cooperation with theologically more liberal New England-based Congregationalists in missionary efforts in the West, laid the seeds of a divisive theological quarrel among Presbyterians over revivalist practices. The “New School” Presbyterian wing, more inclined toward evangelicalism, also proved more sympathetic to the young immediate abolitionist movement. In the 1830s, abolitionists lobbied the Presbyterians to enforce their church’s 1818 condemnation of slavery. Before this early abolitionist campaign could succeed, the Presbyterian denomination underwent a serious schism when the conservative “Old School” majority at the 1837 General Assembly expelled its “New School” opponents, including the heavily abolitionist Western Reserve Synod in Ohio.

Southerners composed only a minority in either of the new Presbyterian denominations. One scholar estimates that 85 percent of Virginians and other southern Presbyterians sided with the Old School. In the Kentucky Synod, leaders like the Reverend Robert J. Breckinridge held most congregations in the Old School by promoting a moderate antislavery position. Nationally, conservative church authorities in both of the new Presbyterian denominations tried to avoid any disputes over slavery that might provoke additional divisions. The persistent petitioning of a small southern Ohio-based antislavery minority of Old School Presbyterians, however, forced the denomination’s General Assembly to declare in 1845 that while the church disapproved of the many evils accompanying slavery, the Bible gave no sanction for barring slaveholders from Christian communion. Under similar pressure from abolitionists among its ranks, especially the Synod of Indiana’s John Dickey and the Synod of Peoria’s George Bassett, the New School Presbyterian 1846 General Assembly acknowledged the oppressive character of slavery but pronounced it unfair “by general
and promiscuous condemnation” to treat all slaveholders as sinners and unfit for church membership. Strict abolitionists regarded such rulings as compromises falling far short of long-established antislavery principles.23

Old School spokesmen described their church as a genuine antislavery body opposed to both proslavery and abolitionist fanaticism. By acknowledging the evil of slavery but retaining the fellowship of slaveholders, Old School Presbyterian leaders claimed they could persuade masters to manumit their slaves. In Kentucky, Old School Presbyterian ministers maintained their active testimony against slavery. For example, Robert Breckinridge of Lexington freed his slaves and endorsed colonization. Despite his mildly antislavery views, Breckinridge held the state post of superintendent of public education (1847-53), actively supported the effort for gradual emancipation in 1850-51, and vigorously fought against secession in 1861. Breckinridge, Center College President John C. Young, and Stuart Robinson, all Old School Presbyterians, became active colonizationists and leaders of the state’s gradual emancipation movement that peaked in the early 1850s. In the nearby Synod of Cincinnati, the Reverends Erasmus D. McMasters and Thomas E. Thomas defended abolitionism against vigorous attacks by George Junkin, the president of Miami University. Despite the abolitionists’ efforts, the frequency and fervor of antislavery pronouncements by Old School spokespersons in the border states steadily declined in the two decades before 1860.24

Following the 1837 schism, several thousand slaveholders had sided with the more evangelistic New School Presbyterian denomination. While Tennessee was the New School stronghold in the slave states, the denomination also established Border South presbyteries from Maryland to Missouri. These southerners joined influential allies in East Coast cities like Philadelphia to resist any action to strengthen the denomination’s testimony against slavery. The anti-abolition
coalition had the New School General Assembly delegate authority over slavery to lower level officials. The continued tolerance of slave owners among the New School Presbyterians finally provoked a few thousand abolitionists, mainly in Ohio and western Pennsylvania, to secede and create the Free Presbyterian Church which denied membership to slaveholders or fellowship to any religious organization that did not do likewise. The slavery debate nonetheless continued in church councils as abolitionists pressured the denomination to censure proslavery pronouncements by groups such as the Presbytery of Lexington, Kentucky. When antislavery forces succeeded in passing such a resolution in 1857, seven slave state presbyteries seceded and formed the United Synod of the South. However, the Missouri Synod, where slaveholding remained acceptable among both pastors and members, returned to the New School General Assembly after a brief period of independence. As a result, even after more than a quarter-century of agitation, the New School Presbyterian Church never precisely split along sectional lines over slavery.\(^{25}\) The different outcomes of the slavery debate in the two wings of the Presbyterian denomination reveals the complicated interplay of theology, polity, and socioeconomic forces that affected border state churches wrestling with the slavery question.

**Methodists**

The Methodist Episcopal Church began its life in the flush of post-Revolutionary antislavery sentiment. In keeping with the expectations of the era, the original Methodist discipline condemned the “buying and selling of men, women, and children” and resolved that members who bought and sold slaves “with no design other than to hold them as slaves...shall be expelled.” The 1800 Methodist General Conference, however, authorized “each annual conference to form their own regulations relative to buying and selling slaves.”\(^{26}\) By the 1820s only the ministry in states that permitted legal manumission enforced the prohibition.

Black Methodists had been among the earliest to protest the retrogression in their denomination’s testimony against slavery. These complaints coupled with a growing desire to escape white supervision finally led to the establishment of two small independent black denominations, the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Zion, both strongest in the states that straddled slavery’s border. Both provided strong testimony against colonization and cautious encouragement to antislavery work inside the Methodist Episcopal Church. On account of the precarious position of their congregations in the Border South, however, neither black Methodist denomination publicly endorsed the immediate abolitionists.\(^{27}\)

The 1830s witnessed an intensifying confrontation in Methodists’ national quadrennial meetings between northern abolitionists calling upon the church to act against slaveholding and a growing number of angry southerners defending slavery’s moral standing. In between, moderates of both sections, with the
greatest strength in the border states, tried to use church authority to suppress the abolitionist agitation while simultaneously upholding the denomination’s traditional disapproval of slavery. For example, the Baltimore and Kentucky conferences clung to old church rules against ordaining slaveholding ministers rarely observed in the Deep South. The Kentucky Conference endorsed gradual abolition in 1822 and Methodist ministers such as Peter Cartwright played leading roles in the successful opposition to the effort to amend the Indiana and Illinois constitutions to introduce slavery.28

Despite their rejection of abolitionism throughout the 1830s and early 1840s, the border state Methodist conferences of Baltimore and Kentucky and the denomination’s Cincinnati-based *Western Christian Advocate* continued to pay lip service to their church’s antislavery heritage by endorsing colonization and missionary work among the slaves. After repeated unsuccessful attempts to get the church to enforce its antislavery discipline, about ten thousand northern abolitionists seceded in the early 1840s and founded the Wesleyan Methodist Connection. Conservative northern leaders, controlling the Pittsburgh, Indiana, and other conferences, warned Methodists attracted by the Wesleyans’ moral appeals that their church’s powerful influence on behalf of amelioration and gradual emancipation would be destroyed if it adopted undiluted abolitionist doctrines. In their attempt to staunch both abolitionism and proslaveryism, they found many allies in the southern border states.29

The Methodist General Conference of 1844 tested the conciliatory policy of the conservatives. Bishop James O. Andrew of Georgia had recently become a slaveholder through inheritance, sparking a test of one of the few remaining anti-slavery rules of the church that prohibited bishops owning slaves. The conference voted 110 to 68 that Andrew’s slaveholding “will greatly embarrass the exercise of his office…if not in some place prevent it” and suspended him from his episcopal duties as long as he continued to own slaves. The heavy vote against Andrew by delegates of the Baltimore Conference prompted Mississippians to brand it “The Brutus of the South.”30 Outraged southerners immediately seceded to form the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Efforts to arrange an equitable division of properties failed, and the old and new churches became contentious rivals for the loyalty of congregations in the Border South.
In the months following the initial Methodist split, the Baltimore Conference called for reunion. Other conferences in Kentucky, Missouri, and Appalachian portions of Virginia also endorsed conciliation. Deep South advocates of a separate regional denomination responded by charging that northern abolitionists had subverted both Methodist doctrine and polity and making creation of a new body essential to preserve true Methodism. To stress the inherent conservatism of such an action, southern militants ironically opposed any proslavery modifications of the denominational discipline. To attempt to hold the loyalty of the border, southern Methodists met to organize their separate denomination in Louisville. The maneuver had some impact as the Kentucky, Missouri, and Appalachian Virginia (Holstein) conferences broke ranks with Baltimore and joined the new Methodist Episcopal Church, South.31

The sectional schism of the denomination, however, lacked real precision. As many as four thousand Methodists, including many slaveholding laymen, and scores of congregations from the border states retained their allegiance to conferences of the northern Methodist Episcopal Church that spanned the slave state/free state divide. A few of the southern Methodists siding with the North became outspoken critics of slavery. For example, Virginia minister Wesley Smith preached openly not only against slavery but the Fugitive Slave Law in the mid-1850s. While in the 1850s southerners occasionally accused “northern” Methodist missionaries in their region of being abolitionist spies, the bulk of border state Methodists who remained affiliated with the northern Methodist Episcopal Church advanced no farther than the traditional censure of slave
owning clergymen. A number of congregations in the southern portion of Indiana and Illinois, where slave state immigrants predominated, shifted their allegiance to the new southern Methodist organization.32

The imprecise nature of the Methodists’ sectional schism served to magnify the influence of border state residents in both branches. In the late 1840s, the Baltimore, the Ohio, and several other northern border state conferences refused to sanction the original plan for a regional division of the Methodist Church. Led by active colonizationists Thomas E. Bond of Baltimore and L. L. Hamline of Ohio, they decried the separation as likely to destroy the denomination’s moderate antislavery influence across the nation to the advantage of both northern abolitionists and proslavery southerners. Hamline rose to the episcopacy and Bond to its major editorial chair. Down to 1864, border state residents from both sides of the Mason-Dixon line and their conservative northern border state allies successfully blocked abolitionist efforts to strengthen church pronouncements against slavery by expelling the remaining slaveholding members.33

**Baptists**

Like the Methodists, the Baptist Church had been a small dissenting sect in the colonial era, but their effective evangelical techniques enabled them to grow into the country’s second largest denomination next to the Methodists by the 1830s. Among African American churchgoers in most Border South states, Baptists far outstripped all other denominations in recruiting. The Baptists’ traditional opposition to any form of central-governing structure meant the denomination had no official disciplinary position on slavery. Many border state associations of Baptist congregations, however, had condemned slavery. In particular, many “Friends of Humanity” associations of Kentucky and Midwestern Baptists had battled the introduction of slavery into their regions and banned slave owners from their communion tables.34

By the early 1840s, abolitionist agitation produced a crisis in the Baptist missionary and publication societies that loosely tied together the denomination’s independent congregations. In both the Baptist triennial convention that oversaw foreign missions and the American Baptist Home Missionary Society that sponsored domestic missions, conservative northerners encountered growing pressure from both abolitionists and proslavery southerners. In an attempt to quell southern fears, the mission societies dismissed abolitionists from all leadership posts and issued circulars affirming their neutrality on the morality of slavery. Such efforts failed to reassure southerners. In 1844-45, southern militants issued demands that both Baptist mission societies appoint slaveholders as
missionaries. When northern majorities controlling each group balked at what the foreign missions board described as “any arrangement which would imply approbation of slavery,” southern Baptists quickly launched separate mission operations. But the sectional separation of the Baptists was never complete in the denomination’s publication operations. For example, the American and Foreign Bible Society continued to elect slaveholding officers and to receive substantial contributions from southerners during the pre-Civil War era.35

At approximately the same time, a small group of African American Baptists also broke away and formed their own missionary program in opposition to the perceived proslavery stance of the denomination’s missions. This American Baptist Missionary Convention included among its leaders the Reverend Chauncey Leonard of Washington, D.C. The large majority of Border South Baptists, however, remained either in local associations dominated by their white coreligionists or in the “invisible church,” independent of direct white oversight. Either way, border state black Baptists, as historian Charles Irons argues, ironically abetted religious proslaveryism by validating “white evangelicals’ conviction that slavery and Christianity could go hand in hand.”36

After 1845, abolitionists frequently charged that many northern Baptists still maintained cordial relations with southern slaveholding Baptists. A close examination of border state Baptists reveals truth behind those accusations. In the lower Midwest and in cities like Philadelphia, for example, Baptist congregations continued to welcome southerners to their pulpits and communion tables even during the Civil War. At the same time, antislavery clergy proved rarer among Baptists than the other evangelical faiths in the southern border states. Exception such as James M. Pendleton of Bowling Green and William W. Everts of Louisville supported the gradual emancipation campaign in their state. Pendleton even placed his prodigious command of the scriptures behind the task of chastising the proslavery Bible case.37 Thanks to the decentralized nature of the Baptist denomination, a great diversity of viewpoints regarding slavery persisted down to the Civil War and nowhere more so than in the border region.

Disciples of Christ
One important evangelical denomination in the border states, the Disciples of Christ, avoided a sectional division before the Civil War. Founded by seceders from a number of denominations, the Disciples came together in 1832 on a doctrine of scriptural literalism that rejected all human-made divisions among Christians. The Disciples’ theological tenets incorporated elements of both liberal rationalism and evangelical postmillennialism and they achieved popularity through a modified revivalist preaching style. Before the Civil War, most of the Disciples lived in the Border South state of Kentucky and the southern portions of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.38
Unlike the region’s other evangelical denominations, the Disciples successfully avoided divisive debates over slavery. Although Disciple leaders criticized cruel practices accompanying slavery, they declared that the scriptures did not condemn slaveholding as sinful and so rejected church discipline against masters. In the 1820 and 1830s, the Disciples’ early leaders, Alexander Campbell of western Virginia and Barton W. Stone of Kentucky, were prominent supporters of compensated emancipation. Reflecting the denomination’s large southern membership, however, antislavery sentiment in the Disciples rarely went beyond endorsements of colonization during the 1830s.39

Theological considerations played a major role in the rejection of abolitionism by the Disciples of Christ. The Disciples preached an unusual version of postmillennialism, contending that the Bible’s prophecy of a thousand-year millennial reign of Christ was a more symbolic than literal period of time. Unlike most other denominations, they denied that churches could demand perfectionist standards of social behavior, including the renunciation of slaveholding, before the second coming of Christ. Adhering to a doctrine of scriptural literalism, the Disciples’ leader Alexander Campbell had pronounced slaveholding not intrinsically sinful. The Disciples’ commitment to Christian unity likewise led them to spurn antislavery membership tests and to accept slave owners into the denomination. Campbell rebuked the abolitionists’ proscriptive moralism as a danger to the ideal of Christian unity. The Disciples’ American Christian Missionary Society even refused to aid any applicant with outspoken antislavery views.40

Although the Disciples infrequently participated in abolitionist projects, anti-slavery sentiments nevertheless grew inside the denomination, particularly in Ohio and Indiana during the 1850s. Antislavery Disciples such as James A. Garfield launched their own newspaper and college and eventually their own mission society. Despite the action of these radicals, slaveholders remained welcome as members of the Disciples of Christ until the Civil War brought about emancipation. In the mid-1840s, Campbell argued that the slavery issue should be settled by the political process and that it should not disrupt Christian unity. Like the liturgical denominations and the Old School Presbyterians, the Disciples of Christ rejected abolition and retained a membership on both sides of the slave/free dividing line.41
IV. Border State Churches and the Coming of the Civil War

As demonstrated in the above survey of the border state churches’ response to the slavery debate, generalizations about the attitudes and institutions in this diverse region are difficult to make. Some denominations maintained their silence on the divisive slavery question and avoided a sectional rupture. Most of those that divided before the Civil War did so in an imprecise manner that often left thousands of southern border state residents, including some slave owners, in so-called “northern” churches and even a few northerners in southern ones. More important, the traditional moderate position on the moral issues surrounding slavery survived in many denominations most strongly represented in the border state region. As a consequence, border state churchmen often played a moderating role in the political debates over slavery of the 1850s and the subsequent secession crisis of 1860-61. This final section offers some tentative hypotheses about the border state churches’ role in the political crisis leading up to the Civil War.

While religious abolitionists persisted in their agitation in denominational councils to take stronger action against slavery, their efforts to propagandize the border state churches had little direct effect in the 1840s and 1850s. The small antislavery Wesleyan Methodist Connection and the abolitionist American Missionary Association attempted to plant “colonies” in the border states focused on missionaries who preached an uncompromising antislavery theology. The most successful of these missionaries, John Gregg Fee, a Kentucky-born reformer and minister, trained at Lane Theological Seminary in Ohio, where he embraced racial equality and abolitionism. In 1848, when the New School Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky forced Fee from the organization because of his anti-slavery views, he gained support for his ministry from the American Missionary Association. Considered radical by the standards of most of his white Kentucky neighbors, Fee proposed immediate emancipation and advocated educational opportunities and integration for all blacks. In 1854, he moved to central Kentucky and founded the town of Berea on land donated by Cassius M. Clay. Fee and his supporters, including many former students at Oberlin College, used Berea as a center of antislavery activity, founding schools and churches to promote abolition and integration. The American Missionary Association supported similar mission bases by Wesleyan Methodist clergymen who preached to poor white congregations in western Virginia. When local authorities drove the American Missionary Association’s agents from the South following the raid on Harpers Ferry, religious abolitionists arranged for the “exiles” to tour the North spreading the antislavery message in religious circles.42

With these few exceptions, the sectional crisis played out in the border state churches with little direct influence from the organized abolitionist movement.
Border state Quakers continued their support of the Underground Railroad and the free produce movement in the 1840s and 1850s, but most Friends continued to believe that immediate abolition would result in morally unacceptable violence. However, with the appearance of the more moderate anti-extensionist political parties, the Free Soilers and Republicans, many northern border state Quakers endorsed them. In the 1850s, as the denomination found a political means to embrace its moderate antislavery tradition, yearly meetings of Friends largely ceased expelling active abolitionists.

In contrast, the ritualist denominations of the border states, the Roman Catholic, Protestant Episcopal, and Lutheran churches, treated slavery as a secular rather than a moral issue, and remained officially neutral in the political controversies leading up to secession and the Civil War. Ethnocultural voting analysis has suggested that the heavily immigrant Catholic and Lutheran population nationwide as well as in the border states supported the more proslavery Democratic Party, but neither of those denominations nor the Episcopalians officially endorsed candidates on either side in the sectional debate. Following secession, the Roman Catholic hierarchy even claimed institutional neutrality on the question of preserving the Union. Although they remained officially neutral on the question of secession, Episcopal leaders in the states of the Confederacy, including Virginia, organized a new church body in 1861. In border states like Maryland and Kentucky, however, diocesan leaders made clear that their church remained politically neutral even when they gave support to the Union as private citizens. Lutherans remained politically neutral on secession, but the denomination’s border state regional synods endorsed the military success of the armies of their locale. Strikingly, all three denominations’ rejection of abolitionist moral principles remained so strong that none of them endorsed emancipation measures even during the war.

Two other border state denominations, the Disciples of Christ and the Old School Presbyterian Church, also attempted to maintain a neutral position toward the intensifying sectional controversy. The Disciples enjoyed more success in maintaining an official silence during the heated political issues of the 1840s and 1850s. The Disciples’ leaders, many with pacifist inclinations, strove for a kind of neutrality during the secession crisis and persisted in it throughout the Civil War. Ironically, the Old School Presbyterians’ denunciations of “political preaching” did not prevent several ministers from publicly counseling obedience to the Fugitive Slave Law. The political antislavery movement had little impact on most northern border state Old School Presbyterians, who continued to vote with the Democrats before and throughout the Civil War. In the Border South and especially in Kentucky, however, Old School Presbyterians remained loyal to their moderate antislavery heritage and played a prominent part in the unsuccessful
drive in 1850-51 for gradual emancipation in the state. Similarly, Old School Presbyterians like Robert Breckinridge actively campaigned against Kentucky’s secession in 1861.45

The behavior of those Kentucky Old School Presbyterians typified the tradition in many border state churches of moderation regarding slavery, neither condemning nor endorsing the morality of slave owning. Instead, these churches continued to encourage amelioration and gradual emancipation programs such as colonization. This moderate stance, rejecting both abolition and proslavery, remained strongest in the region’s large evangelical denominations—the Methodists, Baptists, and New School Presbyterians—during the political crisis leading to the Civil War and secession. The evidence for this pattern of moderation is more difficult to perceive in the band of border states running immediately north of the dividing line between slavery and freedom. Voters in those states, for example, provided the electoral margin for Democrat James Buchanan’s victory over Republican John C. Fremont in 1856. Nevertheless, abundant anecdotal evidence reveals that many evangelical churchmen in the Border North states gradually adopted a stronger political stance against slavery during the 1840s and 1850s. For example, Methodist Mathew Simpson’s editorials in the Cincinnati-based Western Christian Advocate denounced the Compromise of 1850. New School Presbyterian Albert Barnes of Philadelphia condemned the Kansas-Nebraska Act and endorsed Lincoln’s election. After secession, the large Philadelphia Baptist Association which had before 1861 consistently clung to official silence regarding slavery, denounced slaveholding as a sin and resolved in favor of immediate emancipation.46

The findings of recent quantitative studies of antebellum voting support the anecdotal evidence. Although their evidence is fragmentary, these studies find that antislavery Free Soil and Republican voters tended to belong to the evangelical Methodist, Baptist, and New School Presbyterian denominations of the border state regions.47 While most of these churchmen had earlier rejected the abolitionism of the Liberty Party at the polls, as they had in their church practices, political controversies beginning with the war with Mexico moved a significant portion of them to vote for the new anti-extension political candidates as an expression of the Border North’s moderate moral disapproval of slavery. In 1860, these antislavery churchgoers would be the core constituency that eventually placed Republican Abraham Lincoln in the White House.
Historians have long noted that clergymen from the Deep South almost unanimously supported secession following Lincoln’s election. As Mitchell Snay observes, a quarter-century spent rebutting abolitionist attacks led them to “invest secession with moral significance,” a divinely ordained goal that would create “a purified, Christian Southern nation.” In the Deep South, church leaders defended the separation of the Methodist, Baptist, and New School Presbyterian churches as a necessary response to abolitionist aggression. Churchmen who defended these schisms as conservative defenses of doctrinal and institutional integrity employed similar arguments in favor of political secession to protect the Constitution and the rights of slaveholders from the threat of purportedly abolitionist Abraham Lincoln’s election as president in 1860.48

Nevertheless, a brand of religious “unionism” appeared in the Border South during and after the 1860-61 secession crisis. Southern border state church groups, many retaining links to northern religious institutions, managed to offer alternatives to southern nationalist extremism in the name of the older moderate religious attitudes toward slavery. Historian David Cheseborough amply chronicles prominent “dissenting clergy” from Kentucky, Maryland, and western Virginia who spoke out against secession, some times at the cost of their pulpits.49 Most of these churchmen had for several decades defended, against the assertions of abolitionists and proslavery advocates, a moderate moral stance toward slavery in their church councils, and this position would help them resist the call of political secession, particularly given the assurances of the Lincoln administration that its war goals did not include emancipation.

Conclusion
As this survey of religious life along the border between North and South reveals, the sectional division over the morality of slavery that developed in the years from the Revolution to the Civil War remained imprecise. While the abolitionists’ condemnation of slave owning won adherents in northern church circles and proslavery attracted many converts in southern denominations, a moderate position between the two extremes remained popular in the border state churches. The unbroken bonds connecting churchmen in Maryland, western Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri to northern religious sentiments and institutions undoubtedly contributed to holding those key states in the Union during the secession crisis. The part that border state churches played in holding that region in the Union contributed to the eventual victory over southern secession and indirectly to the emancipation of slaves that occurred as a wartime measure.
1. For these geographic designations, see Stanley Harrold, Border Wars: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), xii, 215-16n1; William W. Freehling, The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17-20.


11 McKivigan, War against Proslavery Religion, 45-47; Cheseborough, Clergy Dissent, 8.


14 Jordan, Slavery and the Meetinghouse, 16-17, 20, 38, 108-109; Crothers, Quakers Living in the Lion’s Mouth, 106-277; Stephen B. Weeks, Southern Quakers and Slavery (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1896); Cheseborough, Clergy Dissent, 57-60.

15 Jordan, Slavery and the Meetinghouse, 8-13; Crothers, Quakers Living in the Lion’s Mouth, 136-69; McKivigan, War against Proslavery Religion, 44; Larry H. Ingle, Quakers in Conflict: The Hicksite Reformation (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986).

16 McKivigan, War against Proslavery Religion, 105-107; Jordan, Slavery and the Meetinghouse, 45-62, 49-51, 113-14; Crothers, Quakers Living in the Lion’s Mouth, 201-12.

17 David Hein and Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., The Episcopalians (Westport, Ct.: Praeger, 2004), 77; Scherer, Slavery in the Churches, 126-29; Dillon, Abolitionists, 3-12; McKivigan, War against Proslavery Religion, 27, 50; C. C. Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the Civil War (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1985), 134; Engelder, “Churches and Slavery,” 260-70.

18 Madeleine Hooke Rice, American Catholic Opinion in the Slavery Controversy (Gloucester, Ma.: Peter Smith, 1964); Stafford Poole and Douglas J. Slaun, Church and Slave in Perry County, Missouri, 1818-1865 (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 52-58, 93, 95; Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation, 134.


20 Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation, 138.


23 Irons, Origins of Proslavery Christianity, 196; McKivigan, War against Proslavery Religion, 165-70; Bailey, Shadow on the Church, 232-36.

24 Stanley Harrold observes that Breckinridge blamed the lack of enforcement in northern border states for provoking much of the South’s secessionist sentiment; see Harrold, Border Wars, xii. Tallant, Evil Necessity, 50, 59-61, 73, 91-92; Bailey, Shadow on the Church, 233-35, 252; Cheseborough, Clergy Dissent, 9, 44-45; Victor B. Howard, “The Antislavery Movement in the Presbyterian Church, 1835-1861” (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1961), 78-79.


27 McKivigan, War against Proslavery Religion, 107; Raboteau, Slave Religion, 204-207.

28 Mathews, Slavery and Methodism, 50-56, 252-54; Bailey, Shadow on the Church, 237.

29 Mathews, Slavery and Methodism, 94-97, 104; Engelder, “Churches and Slavery,” 139-40.

30 Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation, 83 (first quote); Mathews, Slavery and Methodism, 262 (second quote).


38 Tennessee was the one additional stronghold for the early Disciples; see Bailey, *Shadow on the Church*, 158-70.


49 Cheseborough, *Clergy Dissent*, 51-57; see also Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, 199-204.
The American Civil War has been part of The Filson’s heritage since its founding in 1884. Its ten founders were evenly divided between North and South. While the war could be a sensitive subject, Filson lectures included accounts of battles and personal reminiscences. And The Filson collected Civil War-related material so that collection today is large and nationally significant. Previous collection essays profiled the institution’s secession related material and the letters of Captain Benjamin F. Walter of the 23rd Indiana Infantry.

As the sesquicentennial of the conflict continues, The Filson decided to devote its entire carriage house museum space to the Civil War exhibit, “United We Stand—Divided We Fall.” The title is, of course, Kentucky’s state motto, adopted long before 1861 and prescient in its prediction of what civil war would do to the nation over four long, terrible years. Kentucky could not sustain its initial effort to remain neutral and play the role of compromiser and peacemaker. Kentuckians had to choose sides. The state legislature voted into office in the summer of 1861 determined that Kentucky would remain in the Union. The majority of Kentuckians supported that decision, but a vocal and determined minority did not. As many as forty thousand Kentuckians fought for the Confederacy, and many more sympathized with the southern cause.
on both sides wrote letters, kept diaries, had photographs made, and tucked away remembrances of the war when they came home—uniforms, weapons, flags, and such. After the war, both Union and Confederate veterans participated in reunions. As the years passed and the soldiers aged and died, they or their families gathered up this documentary and artifact heritage and presented it to The Filson. While The Filson has exhibited small segments of the collection for years, the sesquicentennial seemed like an appropriate time to devote a major exhibit to the war.

“United We Stand—Divided We Fall” begins in the 1850s and the widening division between North and South. A number of Kentuckians played significant roles on the national stage in the antebellum period, including Henry Clay, Zachary Taylor, James Guthrie, and John Crittenden. Two native Kentuckians—Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis—served as presidents of the warring sides. Native Louisvillian Robert Anderson commanded Fort Sumter at the war’s beginning and became an early hero in the North.

Subsequent exhibit sections are thematic, addressing areas such as Louisville during the war, African Americans, weapons, medical care, death and mourning, the
home front, guerrilla activity, a soldier’s life and experience, prisoners of war, music, and reunions. Utilizing a broad range of materials—letters, diaries, photographs, prints, portraits, maps, books, pamphlets, and artifacts—the exhibit allows the visitor to learn more about the conflict and view historical material. A sampling of the items on display include the guidon of Company I of the 3rd Kentucky Cavalry, Union, kept by Lieutenant Lewis Dunn of Grayson County, Kentucky, as a souvenir; a battle scarred second national flag of the Confederate States of America, captured at Jenkins’ Ferry, Arkansas, on April 30, 1864, by the 50th Indiana Infantry (raised in Clark County) and brought home by Captain Isaac Craig. His diary entry for that day notes the fierce battle and the taking of three enemy colors (this flag being one). Henry Hurst of the 6th Kentucky Infantry, CSA, belonged to the famous Orphan Brigade. He wrote his sweetheart and sent her his photo. His letter to her of July 13, 1864, was written nine days before he died outside Atlanta. Captain John Weller of the 4th Kentucky Mounted Infantry of the Orphan Brigade was more fortunate. His letter of December 1, 1863, describes his wounding at Chickamauga a couple of months earlier. His photo taken in January 1864 shows he healed nicely.

Not all soldiers kept their uniforms. Some had no uniforms by the time they made it home and some wore them until they wore out. But a few, fortunately, packed them away. Parts of three are in the exhibit: a rare butternut coat and vest worn by Confederate Edward Johnson Pope; Confederate General William Preston’s uniform coat and sash; and Union Lieutenant Alfred Pirtle’s coat, sash, and kepi. Letters of Preston and Pirtle and war dated photos of them in their uniforms are also exhibited.
THE FILSON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
The Filson has excellent Civil War image and sheet music collections. Sheet music is distributed throughout the exhibit to illustrate the various themes. From the northern tribute to “The Hero of Fort Sumter” (Robert Anderson) to the postwar southern tribute to those who wore “The Faded Gray Jacket,” the music speaks to patriotism, battle, separation of loved ones, death, gender, race, and more. Whether a studio portrait or battlefield scene, photographs and prints produced during the war help visitors connect with the war’s soldiers and civilians.

“United We Stand—Divided We Fall” will remain open to the public Monday through Friday, ten a.m. to four p.m., through 2012 and into 2013. It is free and arrangements for groups can be made (call 502-635-5083). The Filson is well into its second century of collecting and preserving historical material and telling the significant stories of Kentucky and the Ohio Valley. The Civil War is certainly one of the most significant of those stories and The Filson is honored to present this exhibit.

James J. Holmberg
Curator, The Filson Historical Society
Review Essay

“Heaven is a Kentuck of a Place” Exceptionalism in the Historiography of Early Kentucky

Craig Thompson Friend

Every one in the western country has heard the anecdote, that a Methodist preacher from this state, in another state, was preaching, and expatiating upon the happiness of heaven. Having gradually advanced toward the cap of his climax, “In short,” said he, “my brethren, to say all in one word, heaven is a Kentuck of a place.”

Over the years, Kentuckians have been passionate caretakers of the state's history. In 1836, a group of prominent citizens formed the Kentucky Historical Society specifically to preserve the commonwealth's history. In 1884, another group founded the Filson Club (now The Filson Historical Society), naming their institution after Kentucky's first “historian” and appointing Reuben T. Durrett as its president. Both organizations formed to preserve historical documents, promote the study of Kentucky history, and publish historical works about the state. Durrett had accumulated a large body of historical printed and manuscript materials that became the foundation of The Filson Historical Society's collection. Also, both institutions were created by private individuals and rose to prominence in an age of intense filiopietism, as whites sought to buttress their “American” identity against the huddled masses of immigrants pouring into the United States and, in a southern state like Kentucky, to defend the Lost Cause. Genealogy became more than a pastime, giving rise to patriotic organizations like the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Society of Mayflower Descendants, and the Order of First Families of Virginia.

The nation's centennial in 1876 also inspired a wave of state histories that helped white Americans contextualize their ancestors. President Ulysses S. Grant publicly charged Americans to write histories of their states and communities. While few could claim a forefather of national significance, many could make a case for their ancestors' relevance in fighting Indians, settling the West, and advancing American “civilization.” Today, libraries nationwide hold the flurry of county and state histories produced between the mid-1870s and the early
1920s. In Kentucky, those titles included Lewis and Richard H. Collins’s *Collins Historical Sketches of Kentucky* (1874); Nathaniel Shaler’s *Kentucky: A Pioneer Commonwealth* (1885); Zachary Smith’s *History of Kentucky* (1885); J. C. Battle and W. H. Perrin’s *Kentucky: A History of the State* (1888); E. Polk Johnson’s *A History of Kentucky and Kentuckians* (1912); Robert Cotterill’s *History of Pioneer Kentucky* (1917); and Charles Kerr, William Elsey Connelley, and E. Merton
Coulter’s *History of Kentucky* (1922). In addition, in 1903 the Kentucky Historical Society established *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, a journal dedicated to state history. In 1926, the Filson Club followed with *The Filson Club History Quarterly*. These works shared the same tone of exceptionalism: while they presented Kentucky’s history as part of the history of the United States, they also depicted it as unique, particularly as it related to westward expansion and providential destiny. “Kentuckians may justly be proud of their state,” Charles Kerr proclaimed. “In historical importance, wealth of natural resources, pride of ancestry, love of state, it has no superior….For the Kentucky that is to be, the Kentucky of the past must ever be an inspiration.”

States were invested in such narratives, not only for reasons of pride and citizenship but for presenting collective and robust identities to potential residents and economic investors. Thus, the Commonwealth of Kentucky joined in the historical pursuit of exceptionalism. It began partially subsidizing *The Register* in 1903 and started renting the Old State Capitol to the KHS in 1920. In the 1960s, the Commonwealth maneuvered the KHS into a state agency, the first of three components of the Commonwealth’s new program to promote state history. The second component was appointing an official state historian. Hambleton Tapp, assistant director of the KHS and editor of *The Register* since 1971, served as the first state historian from 1975 to 1980, followed by James C. Klotter who served in multiple capacities at the KHS for many years, including executive director from 1990 to 1998, and who remains the state historian as professor at Georgetown College. Under Tapp’s direction, the KHS initiated the third component: a comprehensive history of Kentucky, in four volumes chronologically distributed as the frontier era, 1800-1865, the late nineteenth century, and the twentieth century. With significant contributions by the state historians, the first and third volumes were written within three years, and the fourth volume in 1996. In their preface to the third volume, Tapp and Klotter explained that “at a time when America was being transformed and was leaving behind one way of life, Kentucky often fought that transformation and met change reluctantly.” Such was the historiographical purpose of exceptionalism: to create and define the state as different from, and usually better than, other states.

In its older form, before the “new” history of the 1970s and 1980s, exceptionalism stressed the great achievements of white men, dismissing anything ambiguous or even tragic about their accomplishments. Harry M. Caudill and Thomas D. Clark spent careers defining Kentucky exceptionalism, particularly the role of white men, their success in claiming the land, and the threats that challenged them. “No Kentucky author has cried out more shrilly at so many sins against man and nature, or portrayed his homeland in so forceful and literate a manner as did Harry Caudill,” declared Clark in 1970. While Caudill may have been the loudest, Clark was certainly the most prolific defender of “the region that
had long boasted its Anglo-Saxon origins.” Such historians accepted the exceptional accomplishments of early white Kentuckians without question. Consider, for example, historian Robert Remini who after praising white men like Daniel Boone, concluded: “Because of my research into early Kentucky history, I came to recognize the extraordinary number of genuine heroes who decorate its history. Probably, this is true of many other states as well. I just don’t know. But I do know it is true of Kentucky.”

When the “new” social history emerged, newer forms of exceptionalism that looked beyond the great white men arose. One strain seeks out and emphasizes the multicultural bases of Kentucky society. “In retelling settlers’ stories about their westering experiences,” Elizabeth Perkins sought in 1998 “to make a contribution to the history of a region too long characterized by crude cultural stereotypes.” But she also redirected the historical lens from triumphant “genuine heroes” to “ordinary settlers.” Looking beyond white men allowed historians to find new manifestations of exceptionalism in early Kentucky. Thus in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner had attributed unprecedented forms of politics—white male democracy—to Kentucky’s frontier environment; in 2004, Ellen Eslinger saw the origins of an unprecedented social and cultural form—camp meeting revivalism and the opportunities it provided for white women, youth, and slaves—in Kentucky’s post-settlement chaos of “social disorganization, economic competition, and political partisanship.” While the topical focus may have shifted, historians continued to employ an exceptionalist lens.

Another form of exceptionalism stresses the uniquely negative character of Kentucky culture, as in the unfulfilled potential of its frontier or the persistence of slavery. Recent scholarship has fixated on the exceptional nature of Kentucky’s failures. Stephen Aron wrote How the West Was Lost “to explain what did not happen: the preservation of indigenous fauna and flora, the coalescence or at least continued coexistence of Ohio Indian and backcountry hunters, the protection of pioneer homesteading privileges, the equal distribution or redistribution of land, the perpetuation of customary common rights, the democratization of legal and political systems, the abolition of slavery, the confederation of free and unfree laborers, the implementation of an agrarian political economy, the arrival of the millennium.” Wow! That is a lot to expect from the promise of any exceptional place, but as Aron concluded, Kentucky’s was “Not a history of paradise lost, this is a book about possibilities lost.”

The historiographical trajectory increasingly seems to frame Kentucky less as an exceptionally “good poor man’s country” and more as exceptionally dystopian. John Mack Faragher portrayed Kentucky in declension as early as 1790. By 1800, Daniel Boone had denounced Kentuckians as having “got too proud” and left Kentucky “unwilling to live among men who were shackled in habits.” The 1810s and 1820s brought economic displacement and political chaos, resulting
in a constitutional crisis unmatched elsewhere in the nation. “Precisely what fascinates about the Kentucky crisis is the extent and intensity of this disagreement on the basic question of judicial authority in constitutional matters,” concluded legal scholar Theodore Ruger. “This was an exceedingly rare event in American history: a debate over the proper nature of dualist democracy played out in a political space that was, for a time, purely monistic.” Kentucky's political and social climate devolved so much by the mid-1820s that it produced a couple like Anna and Jeroboam Beauchamp of the infamous Kentucky Tragedy, who were, according to Matt Schoenbachler, “as aberrant, deviant, and bizarre individuals as early America ever produced,” a pair “peculiarly influenced by the pathetic and demonic ideals of their day.”

In Kentucky’s Frontiers, I joined this critique, combining the strains of multicultural exceptionalism and unfulfilled potential. “On Kentucke’s frontiers,” I concluded, “black slaves who risked their lives to scoop up white babies from the forest floor, white women who left forts in the midst of Indian sieges to gather water, and Indians who held off Kentucke militias while their wives and children fled to safety were as heroic as Boone, Clark, or any Hunter from Kentucky.” Where Remini had found genuine heroism, I found exceptional “frenzies of mean fear” that made and remade not only the racial and gendered structures of the state but which also shaped America’s future.

Exceptionalism has probably played a greater role in historians’ interpretations of Kentucky slavery than any other topic. Typical of the older historiography of Kentucky exceptionalism, J. Winston Coleman’s Slavery Times in Kentucky characterized the institution in 1940 as “the mildest form that existed in the United States.” Like many new social historians, Marion B. Lucas, writing in 1992, reacted to the notion that slavery could ever be mild: “Slavery in Kentucky was not a mild form of servitude, for, to the modern mind, no such condition existed.” But the exceptionalist myth about Kentucky slavery remains so powerful that Lucas immediately qualified his denunciation: “But there are, of course, gradations within systems, even the ‘peculiar institution.’” Most recently, Harold Tallant attempted to explain the exceptional nature of Kentucky slavery: “during a period in which white residents of the Lower South were coming to idealize slavery as a positive good, Kentuckians continued to insist that slavery was a necessary evil.” Tallant finds exceptionalism not in the institution itself but in the ideology that white Kentuckians employed to justify it. On the one hand, the “necessary-evil theory allowed Kentuckians to construct a bridge between conflicting sets of values: they could simultaneously embrace both freedom and slavery without experiencing the psychological discomfort of holding obviously contradictory values.” On the other hand, the “necessary-evil doctrine never evolved into either a wholly anti-slavery or wholly proslavery stance: it simultaneously attacked the institution of slavery and defended it.” What could be more dystopic than a society in ideological conflict with itself, with the rest of the South, and with the American nation?
This historiography of exceptionalism preceded the publication of James Ramage and Andrea Watkins’s *Kentucky Rising: Democracy, Slavery, and Culture from the Early Republic to the Civil War* in 2011, a worthy addition as the second volume to the previously incomplete Kentucky history series. The authors examine Kentucky’s social, cultural, political, economic, and military evolutions between roughly the War of 1812 and the Civil War. Moving topically across the era, Ramage and Watkins employ Henry Clay as the embodiment of Kentucky’s rise to national prominence in the three realms of the subtitle: democracy, slavery, and culture. Because of universal white male suffrage secured with the state’s first constitutions, Kentuckians enjoyed a dynamic culture of democratic and participatory politics, not just in voting but in the contentious political debates that characterized the relief crisis, internal improvements, and public education. Because of Kentuckians’ persistence in viewing slavery as a necessary evil (in contrast to the positive good argument that emerged in the late 1820s throughout the Deep South), they enjoyed a reputation as more humane slave owners, overseeing a supposedly milder institution and keeping alive the debate over, and possibility of, abolition. And because Kentuckians developed a “global outlook on life,” they supported and embraced cultural advances in artisanship, architecture, religion, medicine, and science. The authors also trace Kentuckians’ activities in the War of 1812 and the Mexican War as evidence of unsurpassed patriotism, and in three chapters on the Civil War they explore how Kentuckians’ patriotism became complicated even as their courage remained uncontested. Because of the breadth of its chronology and the plethora of anecdotes that fill its pages, *Kentucky Rising* will be a useful book both for scholarly and general audiences. 

As a state history, *Kentucky Rising* not surprisingly frames its sweeping vista through exceptionalism. One need glance no farther than the introduction, where the authors relate the book’s themes: “Kentucky had a relatively elevated status compared with the other states in the first half of the nineteenth century”; “state governors and journalists in the eastern United States encouraged their citizens to emulate Kentuckians as the ideal models of patriotism and nationalistic military spirit”; “Kentuckians were uniquely engaged in public affairs”; “The strong belief in democracy was characteristic of American society, but the power of public meetings in Kentucky was extraordinary”; “Kentuckians were filled with a spirit of hope and optimism and...had a forward-looking, global outlook on life, a perspective that extended into rural areas of the state.” These are grandiose claims to Kentucky’s exceptional place in the early to mid-nineteenth century, and I must admit, despite my own contribution to the historiography of exceptionalism, they make me rather uneasy.

Whether for better or worse, we historians have over-engaged in selling the exceptional character of early Kentucky, often unconsciously declaring it in order to make a case for the significance of our topics. But focusing so
intently on Kentucky restricts our view of larger contexts that frame the state’s history. Kentuckians’ optimism, patriotism and nationalist militarism, democratic engagement, and global outlook were not particularly exceptional during this era. Beyond Daniel Walker Howe’s *What Hath God Wrought*, Ramage and Watkins overlook publications such as Charles Sellers’s *The Market Revolution* and Richard Bushman’s *The Refinement of America* which would have helped them place Kentuckians’ attitudes in wider regional and national contexts and revealed just how common these attitudes were among white Americans between the 1820s and the Civil War. The authors accept wholesale Harold Tallant’s interpretation of Kentucky slavery without considering sources like John Craig Hammond’s *Slavery, Freedom, and Expansion in the Early American West*, Michael Morrison’s *Slavery and the American West*, or Barbara Jeanne Fields’s *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground*. Their bibliography does not indicate that they consulted comparable studies of other places, such as John Brooke’s similarly titled *Columbia Rising* which explores the evolution of the contentious politics of the early republic into a new culture of associated respectability in the ante-bellum period. Nor do they employ much of the most recent scholarship on Kentucky, including Ellen Eslinger’s *Citizens of Zion* and Matt Schoenbachler’s *Murder and Mayhem*, which would have complicated the theme of optimism so loosely employed in *Kentucky Rising*. Even the notion that Kentucky held an elevated status in the early American republic ignores the roots of that status in nineteenth-century Americans’ cultural fascination with the West, as described in my own *Kentucke’s Frontiers*. Ignorance of what scholars produce in parallel fields can easily generate an illusion of uniqueness where none existed.13

The biggest problem with exceptionalism, therefore, is that it seems to be (and often is) parochialism. It tricks us into thinking that our research need only be in Kentucky’s primary sources and secondary literature. It threatens not only to make Kentucky unconnected to the national story but our own scholarship irrelevant to the larger historiography of the nineteenth-century United States. The academic field of state history has been in decline for decades precisely because it emphasizes exceptionalism at the expense of translating that history into terms that give it impact outside a given state. If those of us who study early Kentucky are to leave a mark on the historiography, not only must we become more conversant with national and global stories, we must also contribute to them.
“HEAVEN IS A KENTUCK OF A PLACE”

1 Timothy Flint, Recollections of the Last Ten Years, Based in Occasional Residences and Journeymen in the Valley of the Mississippi… (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, and Co., 1826), 63-64.


9 Craig Thompson Friend, Kentucky’s Frontier (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 293.


12 Ibid., 1, 2, 3, 5.

Crusade Against Slavery is a laudable biography of Edward Coles, who was private secretary to President James Madison and later Illinois’s second governor, and who left his imprint on the nation’s history by resolutely combating a proslavery movement in Illinois during the early 1820s. Coles’s origins did not suggest his future role as an antislavery politician. He was born in 1786 to a wealthy and prominent Virginian family whose prosperity rested on slavery. However, by the age of twenty, not long before receiving an inheritance of twelve slaves and 782 acres of land, Coles renounced slavery, believing it to be incompatible with republican ideals. This conviction radically altered his life trajectory. It pitted him against the wishes of his family and ultimately drove him from Virginia, whose statutes required former slaves to leave the state within a year of emancipation. This determined him to leave, and over the next decade Coles searched for a place where he and his slaves could live in freedom. In 1815, after serving as Madison’s secretary for five years, Coles selected Illinois, a sparsely populated territory on the cusp of statehood that offered cheap and abundant land. Coles’s slaves numbered seventeen by the time he finally left Virginia in 1819, but before arriving in Illinois later that year he had none. As he recorded in his autobiography, he freed them all while “floating gently down the beautiful Ohio, the verdant foliage of Spring just budding out on its picturesque banks,” with “the sun shining bright, and the heavens without a cloud” (64-65). He also described the moving scene that followed: “After a pause of intense and unutterable emotion, bathed in tears, and with tremulous voices, they gave vent to their gratitude, and implored the blessings of God on me” (69). With this act, Coles squared his conscience and represented the best of the country’s ideals. But it would not be the end of his antislavery idealism.
Coles’s praiseworthy and courageous act unexpectedly set him on a course to preserve freedom in Illinois. Only two years after his arrival, Coles was elected state governor. His decision to run for the office reflected his social standing and political ambition. Having come from a distinguished family that had connections with many leading Virginians, Coles complied when friends encouraged him to announce his candidacy. The pre-partisan political climate in the state made his election possible. Although he had no network of friends to lift him into office, three other men also sought the office, which divided the vote and enabled him to eke out a fifty-vote victory. Once elected, he laid bare his antislavery convictions, urging legislators in his December 5, 1822 inaugural address to abolish the remnants of territorial slavery, meliorate the state’s draconian black codes, and protect free blacks against kidnapping. In response, cagey proslavery legislators recommended a constitutional convention to settle the matter. They intended to turn Illinois into a slave state with this adroit stratagem, and they subsequently rammed a bill through the general assembly in February 1823 that authorized an August 1824 public referendum on whether a constitutional convention should be held. They had thrown down the gauntlet to their antislavery governor.

Coles did not flinch. Instead, he unreservedly pitted himself against them for the next eighteen months. As he and many others perceived, the future of the state hung in the balance. Consequently, both proslavery and antislavery forces mobilized intensively to recruit partisans and get out the vote. For the cause of freedom, Coles contributed his substantial gubernatorial salary, authored antislavery missives for the press using four pen names, purchased a newspaper to promulgate antislavery ideas, and persuaded friends in the East to send antislavery pamphlets for distribution. In the end, his efforts bore fruit. Illinoians rejected the convention by a vote of 6,822 to 4,965, thus assuring slavery’s final demise in the state. Although the authors exaggerate by concluding that “it was primarily Edward Coles who prosecuted the contest and gained the victory,” it is likely true that no other single individual exercised so much influence on the outcome (130).

This book deserves praise. While it will not reshape interpretations of the early republic or the antislavery struggle in early Illinois, its authors make a genuine contribution by explaining Coles’s decision to support emancipation and showing how that choice changed his life. It altered virtually every significant subsequent decision he made, and reshaped his relationships with his family, his former slaves, and luminaries like Madison and Thomas Jefferson. To their great credit, the authors tell Coles’s story overwhelmingly from primary sources. This is difficult to do for any historian, but especially so for biographers, who must track down innumerable strands of information to reconstruct a life. Leichtle and Carveth succeed admirably on this front, bringing to light the life of a man who sought justice for others and honor for his country. While they do not judge him one of “the great men of history,” they justifiably contend that he was a great American citizen (210). Like other great citizens, Edward Coles deserves to be known and emulated.

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The Clamorgans: One Family’s History of Race in America
Julie Winch

Jacques Clamorgan was a fascinating scoundrel. The Frenchman settled in St. Louis in the early 1780s, a relentless dealmaker and “perennial lawbreaker” (16). Clamorgan convinced Spanish authorities in the Louisiana country to grant him huge tracts of land in what would later become Missouri and Arkansas, cessions that Clamorgan then leveraged, reclaimed, and leveraged again with flagrant duplicity. Along the way, he lived with (and abused and stole land from) a free woman of color, Ester, and had children with three different slaves. Julie Winch’s The Clamorgans: One Family’s History of Race in America traces these two family inheritances, monetary and racial, from the eighteenth century through the 1950s. Each generation believed it could become enormously wealthy if only they could confirm and gain compensation from the family’s title to Jacques’s millions of acres. It never happened beyond relatively small settlements with individuals who paid the family in order to clear, often temporarily, their own titles. Jacques’s financial legacy proved elusive, and many of his descendants died in poverty. Winch also documents some of the clan’s changing racial identification, both self-described and official. Racial fluidity was a tool in the arsenal of ambitious blacks, especially for people as light skinned as the Clamorgans. Passing, however, raised new risks and often proved emotionally and socially costly.

Using a vast array of archival material, especially deed records and court proceedings, Winch recreates the Clamorgans over five generations. The litigation included three United States Supreme Court cases and seventeen that came before the Missouri Supreme Court. In addition, the U.S. Congress considered the family’s claims on a couple of occasions. The legal thicket, as Winch notes, is “enough to make anyone’s head spin” (217). Clearer are the persistent family characteristics of deceit and self-promotion. For example, Jacques’s daughter Apoline was heir to property that, according to a prior arrangement, could not be sold until she reached the age of twenty five. When only twenty four, she sold it to a friend, and then resold it to someone else after her birthday. The first sale, she argued, was void because she had been “underage,” and she had no intention of returning anyone’s money (108). Her youngest son, Cyprian, forced his
own half-brother to liquidate their partnership in a successful barbershop and bath—and then went into competition with him (178-79).

Race and racial boundaries constantly change in this story, making them both important and unimportant by turns. Apoline shrewdly chose relationships with white men who might make her life comfortable. Her grandson, Henry Clamorgan Jr., became white physician Fordé Morgan, an expert in pharmaceuticals. Another grandson, Louis P. Clamorgan, saw his family rocked by the scandal associated with passing. The family lived in Maplewood, a “white” suburb of St. Louis, and called themselves Spanish. A daughter, Maud, and her husband, who also passed, had a baby whose appearance betrayed her African American heritage. Another daughter was outraged by a rejected suitor. A third daughter’s husband sought an annulment when he learned of the family’s history. Apoline’s son, Cyprian, was white and then black in Reconstruction New Orleans and then white again when he returned north.

Winch knows Cyprian well, having introduced and edited his 1858 book, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis* (1999), and she uses him and his family to close the story. Fast-dealing Cyprian is an apt bookend to his like-minded grandfather. Fashioning himself as white attorney C. C. Morgan in Reconstruction New Orleans, he tried to “squeeze” five hundred dollars out of P. B. S. Pinchback, convicted of assault with intent to kill after a fight with his brother-in-law. The two became enemies and engaged in a gunfight on Canal Street. Had Cyprian been a better shot, Winch says, “he might have gone down in history as a notorious assassin” (337). Instead, his political aspirations thwarted, Cyprian was reduced to seeking financial assistance from his daughter and is buried in an unmarked grave in St. Louis.

This is remarkably layered storytelling, and Winch’s engaging, even gossipy style hints at the relish with which she undertook the project. Her subjects, especially Jacques and Cyprian, seem to amaze even the author in their bald-faced deceptions. These were not nice people, but that makes the story fun. Keeping track of the characters—and the lawsuits!—can be daunting, but the family trees at the beginning of each chapter help, and Winch does her best to keep the narrative from spiraling into a series of “begats.” *The Clamorgans* is very good work.

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**Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom**
Robert H. Gudmestad

The nostalgic imagery of the steamboat as a majestic floating palace gliding into shore captures the imagination, innovation, and life of society surrounding the inland waterways. In *Steamboats and the Rise of the Cotton Kingdom*, Robert Gudmestad pushes beyond the limits of romantic steamboat nostalgia and argues for the centrality of riverboats to the southern antebellum economy and cotton culture. Patterns and rate of southern migration, economic development, and distinct regional and sectional culture underwent dramatic transformations thanks in part to the far-reaching impact of the adoption of steam technology for water-based transportation.

Gudmestad had assiduously analyzed an impressive breadth of sources, including traveler
accounts, newspapers, government reports, court records, manuscripts, illustrations, and state and local histories. He has produced a complex and rich history that places steamboats inextricably within southern antebellum culture and society. Early optimism and prospects of efficient transportation linked the region’s communities to markets via waterways, while ensuring regional development and individual economic opportunities. However, the proliferation of steamboats on the western waters underscored the successful incorporation of the new technology into southern antebellum society and unleashed environmental, agricultural, economic, and cultural changes that reshaped the region. Southern entrepreneurs recognized the potential economic and cultural impact of the arrival of steamboats on the western waterways, but they reconciled their local and individual goals with the market and technological implications of steamboat ownership. While northern and eastern owners of steamboats entered the South to create river trade monopolies, southern community leaders, merchants, and farmers sought ownership of steamboats to ensure market access. These actions did not contradict southerners’ states rights view. Instead, the development of local ownership, the building of purpose-specific boats, and the demands for federal mail service via steamboats helped break the monopolies of outside investors, forge a distinct regional identity, and promote economic stability.

Working and traveling on the western waterways often undercut romanticized notions of opportunity, adventure, and opulence on steamboats. From working crew to traveler, the steamboat both mirrored and rejected southern antebellum class and racial structures. Hierarchies placed pilots and captains atop crewmembers responsible for the physically demanding labor. As more labor-intensive jobs fell to African Americans, distinctions between whites and blacks distorted and exposed the difficulties of determining and maintaining free and slave status. For the traveler, fare and accommodations reinforced their standing in the social hierarchy. Although deck passage was affordable, it exposed the passenger to the open air, the whims of the environment, and interactions between classes. Conversely, cabin passage was more costly but offered a physical separation from deck passengers. Merchants, masters, and slaves accompanied precious bales of cotton for the journey to market while slave traders capitalized on the regular arrivals and departures. In reality, the buzz of daily riverboat life blurred class distinctions and brought farmers, politicians, planters, gamblers, traders, tourists, ministers, free blacks, and slaves into close proximity.

While Gudmestad presents a finely developed and convincing analysis of the far-reaching influence of steamboats on southern antebellum society, perhaps his most significant contributions come in his analysis of how the steamboat aided Indian removal and the environmental consequences of river improvement and timber speculation. The removal process relied on steamboat travel. Nearly 60 percent of the Native Americans displaced from the southern United States in the mid-1830s traveled at least a portion of the journey via steamboat, which many contemporaries perceived as a more humane means of transport. Increased commitment to steamboat transportation also made for safer and more efficient trips. Harvesting riverside timber provided a quick profit for the harvester and ensured a steady supply of fuel for the vessels. But rapid deforestation also exposed riverbanks to erosion and collapse. Increased wood consumption pushed harvesting further inland as riverside timber became scarce, opening more lands for plantation development and cotton production. As operations turned to removing hazards from the waterways for safer passage, straightening efforts aimed to shorten the distance of travel. The improvements had mixed results; removing hazards made for safer passage, but straightening attempts increased water flow rates, exacerbated bank erosion, and altered sediment deposit patterns that left some tributaries unnavigable.

Gudmestad provides a refreshing look at the widespread economic, cultural, and environmental change wrought by the steamboat, including its role in helping create a distinct regional identity. His reexamination of Indian removal and the ecological and environmental manipulation unleashed by the rise of the steamboat offer a reminder of the hidden costs of embracing new technologies. This book deserves a wide readership, including those interested in southern antebellum culture, transportation, technology, and economics.

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Abraham Lincoln and Treason in the Civil War:
The Trials of John Merryman
Jonathan W. White

On May 25, 1861, military officials in Baltimore, Maryland, arrested John Merryman for treason. The southern sympathizer and his compatriots had burned several railroad bridges in the area, preventing Union troops from passing through to Washington, D.C. Merryman was imprisoned in Fort McHenry in Baltimore harbor, where he petitioned Chief Justice Roger B. Taney—then “riding the circuit” while the Supreme Court was not in session—for a writ of habeas corpus. Taney issued the writ on May 26 but President Abraham Lincoln ignored it, having suspended habeas corpus in Maryland in April. Angered by the Lincoln’s actions, Taney issued a written opinion in Ex Parte Merryman on June 1, 1861, berating the president and arguing that the constitutional right to suspend the writ of habeas corpus rested in the hands of the
legislative branch. The case touched off a constitutional spat between the president and chief justice that lasted until the latter’s death in 1864.

As Jonathan White points out, the famed story of Merryman, Taney, and Lincoln is one that historians “love to tell.” Full of historical intrigue and constitutional disagreement, the Merryman case has also had a lasting impact on modern issues of wartime civil liberties, particularly during the United States’ war on terror in the twenty-first century. Yet, White argues, few scholars really know much about John Merryman himself or why the military arrested in him in 1861, not to mention the outcome of the trial. Thus, in Abraham Lincoln and Treason in the Civil War, White sets out to uncover the details surrounding Merryman’s wartime experience. More important, his examination tells a larger story about the complicated world of Civil War legal questions. As White explains, recounting the particulars and context of Merryman’s trial enables him to touch on “nearly every aspect of the treason, disloyalty, and civil liberties issues that arose during the Civil War” (8).

White’s comprehensive research helps demonstrate that, indeed, all of these issues were intimately connected. For example, Lincoln’s thinking about southern amnesty and reconstruction in late 1863 and early 1864, related directly to the problem of how the administration would handle southern sympathizers in the North. Wartime suspension of civil liberties also led to lawsuits against the arresting parties, the subject of White’s final chapter. This issue of prosecuting military and civil authorities connected directly to congressional habeas corpus legislation in 1863. Ultimately, then, the story of wartime legal decision-making was one of action and reaction for the Lincoln administration, the military, civilians, Congress, and the courts alike.

White’s most important contribution to the field of legal history, however, is his insistence that scholars must look beyond official court records to understand fully nineteenth-century legal thinking. By using unpublished case materials and manuscript records, White more effectively illustrates the ways that Taney and Lincoln wrestled with the critical legal questions of the war. Taney’s thinking is significant for a number of reasons, but White highlights one of the most important examples of its influence in his second chapter: the issue of whether the chief justice issued his opinion in Merryman while acting in his capacity as a Supreme Court justice or as a circuit judge. This question has served as a source of debate for legal scholars, but through the original records White determines that
Taney’s thinking evolved as he wrote and rewrote his opinion. In the end, Taney recognized he was presiding over a session of the circuit court but nonetheless altered his opinion to reflect (and “exploit”) his position as chief justice.

Lincoln, too, wrestled with both interpretation and presentation of his constitutional viewpoints. Particularly in determining how to handle the border states, the president understood the challenges of balancing the need to punish treason and using his pardoning power to create a greater commitment to the Union.

White determines that the Merryman case represented the turning point in Lincoln’s thinking. Following Taney’s opinion, the president learned that if he “needed to do something to win the war, he would interpret the Constitution for himself and would, if necessary, bypass both Congress and the courts” (89). This realization had significant implications for the president’s wartime legal action from the issue of conscription to emancipation and beyond.

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Do They Miss Me at Home?
The Civil War Letters of William McKnight, Seventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry
Donald C. Maness and H. Jason Combs, eds.

Lieutenant William McKnight of the 7th Ohio Cavalry did not survive the Civil War. McKnight died in June 1864 at Cynthiana, Kentucky, in an engagement with the horsemen of Confederate Brigadier General John Hunt Morgan. McKnight left behind a widow, Samaria, and six children, along with a revealing and intimate collection of more than one hundred wartime letters. A twenty-nine year old blacksmith from Meigs County, Ohio, and a devoted father of six at the time of his enlistment, McKnight was not a typical Union recruit. Born in Canada to Scottish parents, McKnight joined Company K of the 7th Ohio Cavalry in 1862 and was quickly promoted to sergeant, eventually winning a second lieutenant’s commission (and perhaps the rank of captain, though his final rank remains unconfirmed) shortly before his death.

McKnight was not formally educated, and the editors have wisely chosen to preserve his inconsistent grammar and spelling despite the difficulties these might pose for some modern readers. Throughout the collection, McKnight’s unique voice shines through. He describes many of the routine events in the life of a Civil War cavalry regiment. Although McKnight’s regiment was not famous, it saw its share of hard service in Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, and Alabama in the last three years of the war, and McKnight’s correspondence provides tantalizing details about his unit’s numerous skirmishes and engagements. McKnight’s letters also illustrate the problems soldiers faced due to long absences from home. Homesickness and the strain on his marriage are persistent themes in McKnight’s letters, and at times he had to soothe his wife’s anxieties caused by gossip. For example, when Samaria confronted him about rumors of his infidelity, McKnight replied, “I think the folks at home must have
very little to do and you dear Wife inflicted a severe wound in my Heart when you intimated that I had been unfaithful to you God bless. You are all the world to me” (31).

McKnight’s letters also reveal that he was a sensitive and compassionate man. When Samaria wrote to him in October 1863 asking for financial help, he answered her sorrowfully: “My heart Ackes for you. I never felt so bad about you in my life. There is no chance for to help you as I am out of money. I have the best Horse in the Regmt that I would send home but I cant share him now but hope to put him into market soon and then I wil be able to help you a little. You must do the best you can. I hope to be with you again. It is the one great and uppermost thought of my Heart” (128). Later that month, McKnight described the battlefield death of his friend, Captain Joel P. Higley, to Samaria. “The feeling that came over me at that moment I never can Describe. I raised him gently in my arms walking bacward I draged him 3 Rods up the hill laid him behind a log unable to move him further. I sat or partly fel by his side Determined to die withe him” (133). The following year, McKnight, like his comrade Higley, was killed.

The editors’ introductory essay is a competent general evaluation of the state of Civil War soldier historiography, and provides readers with a useful overview both of Ohio’s contribution to the war effort and the 7th Ohio Cavalry’s service record, as well as sketches of Meigs County, Ohio, and of the McKnight clan’s history. The editors include extensive and excellent notes to assist the reader in situating the events and places in McKnight’s letters. Helpful snippets also introduce key passages in the correspondence. A number of photographs, appendices containing a list of the 7th Ohio’s engagements, and a roster of its officers are useful additions. With the proliferation of published collections of Civil War soldiers’ letters, one might ask what new contribution McKnight’s correspondence offers. This well-edited volume provides a view of one officer’s experiences in an understudied but important area of the war, and historians and buffs interested in gender, family, the home front, cavalry operations in Kentucky and Tennessee, common soldiers and junior officers should all find this collection valuable.

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**A Cry for Justice:** Daniel Rudd and His Life in Black Catholicism, Journalism, and Activism, 1854-1933
Gary B. Agee

Given the winner-centric nature of historical narratives, little wonder that a loser like Daniel Rudd remained unknown for so long. An African American Catholic at the turn of the twentieth century, this journalist and activist issued a “cry for justice” from his position within a double minority. He sought to convince Catholics of blacks’ equality and blacks of Catholicism’s color-blindness. Rudd lived at the intersection of these cultures, doomed to failure and consequent obscurity as the winners gained fame. Gary Agee’s *A Cry for Justice* recovers the tragic story of this African American’s advocacy for full racial equality. Despite the dates in the subtitle, this work is neither a true biography nor a true intellectual history. However, the book will interest anyone who seeks to understand how one African American journalist and activist sought racial equality through Catholicism. Agee’s narrative works best when the three themes mentioned in his subtitle—Catholicism, journalism, and activism—interacted in Rudd’s life, thought, and writings.

Rudd’s ultimate goal of full racial equality included both radical legal and social equality. The author helpfully divides into three stages this black Catholic journalist’s “cry for justice.” First, Rudd editorialized confrontationally, naming specific inequalities and advancing racial justice. Rudd’s provocations eventually gave way to promoting the Catholic Church, an institution he long held as a model of racial equality. Through various networks and organizations, Rudd pushed for racial causes, such as black clergy and educational opportunities for blacks. In the final stage of Rudd’s “cry for justice,” he embraced an ideology of racial uplift, not unlike Booker T. Washington’s platform, based on economic and character development in the face of legal and social discrimination.

Born a slave to a Catholic family in Bardstown, Kentucky, Rudd grew up in the racially mixed religious atmosphere of central Kentucky’s “Catholic Holy Land.” Rudd later reminisced about taking his first communion kneeling “beside as fair a damsel as ever bowed before that rail” in 1863 (14). Eventually, Rudd set up a newspaper and printing office in Cincinnati, from where he and his subscription agents traveled extensively to promote his paper. The *American Catholic Tribune* ran for over a decade (1886-1897) and was a premier African American Catholic newspaper with a readership that at one time reached ten thousand. Rudd edited the periodical, but he also lectured around the country and participated in church and black-advocacy groups. An active lay Catholic his entire life, Rudd helped organize the Colored Catholic Congress in the late 1880s and participated in the Catholic Press Association. After a disastrous move to Detroit in the 1890s and competition from a rival Philadelphia periodical, Rudd quit journalism and migrated to the Deep South. Living in Mississippi and Arkansas, he worked for a black entrepreneur, about whom he wrote a biography before retiring.

At its worst, Agee’s text reads like a list of quotes from Rudd, his allies, and his opponents. The book also suffers from significant organizational problems. For instance, readers finish an early chapter having learned about the
beginnings of the *American Catholic Tribune,* only to find a later section entitled “The Birth of the *American Catholic Tribune.*” During a chapter devoted to Archbishop John Ireland’s view of racial justice, Rudd appears only every so often to offer a response to the hierarch’s pronouncements. Other episodes (such as a white priest’s racist speech to the Colored Catholic Congress) appear in several chapters with nearly identically vague descriptions—and readers never discover the actual content of the speech. In general, the author repeats himself so often and in so many places that it proves a distraction.

Agee appropriately writes of Rudd’s contexts (Catholic social thought, racial violence, economic depression) and he concludes that the activist altered his plans for social equality in response to changing external circumstances. But Rudd hints that the narrative was more complex, and this hidden story scintillates. In it, ironies abound: Rudd attended primarily African American parishes during his years-long advocacy of an integrated Catholicism; his newspaper’s ten thousand subscribers were mostly white, though he targeted black readers. Likewise, Rudd dismissed very real examples of Catholic racism—Catholic proponents of slavery, black children barred from Catholic schools, the eventual segregation of local parishes, the dearth of black priests—as “bad Catholicism” (73-74). Rudd’s “true Catholicism” conveniently supported all his own causes, from American democracy to racial equality. Nothing captivates like an underdog unconvinced of his own failure.

Jeffrey L. Bain-Conkin
University of Notre Dame
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