

ROBERT J. BRECKINRIDGE AND THE SLAVERY CONTROVERSY IN KENTUCKY IN 1849

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No Southerner remained a more consistent and persistent foe of slavery throughout the ante-bellum period than Robert J. Breckinridge. That he was able to advocate gradual emancipation and retain his position of prestige and influence in society is a commentary on the relative liberalism of Kentucky society, Breckinridge's willingness to maintain a flexibility in his commitment to personal goals, and the influence of family prestige and connections which furnished a degree of protection from the resentments and revenge of ambitious and selfish little men. Friends and impartial spectators admired and applauded his virtues, among which were a powerful and persistent will, inflexible courage, and a spirit of noble self-sacrifice for ideals. No man had less personal inducement to occupy a position as an advocate of emancipation in 1849 than Breckinridge. As a benevolent slaveholder no man had greater sacrifices to make in order to do so. No man had less to hope for personally in making any sacrifice at all. Yet he was not moved entirely by a disinterested commitment to humanitarianism. Breckinridge was driven in his course by a stinging conscience that demanded that as a custodian of slave property, he work to establish God's will in the land.¹

In 1830, Breckinridge stood as a candidate for the lower house of the General Assembly of Kentucky. During the campaign he published a series of articles in the *Kentucky Reporter* entitled "Hints on Slavery" in which he advocated gradual emancipation of slaves. When his political opponents began to stir the fears and prejudices of the slaveholders, Breckinridge realized that he would be defeated and withdrew from the political contest. Finding that the great pressing problem of slavery could not be met in a forthright way in politics in Kentucky, he decided to withdraw entirely from political life.² Early in August, 1830, he informed the public of his decision. "I consider my political career among you at an end," he wrote; "persons of other views and principles may conciliate their enemies by means that are revolting to me or bow

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¹ Robert J. Breckinridge to Samuel Steel, April 17, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers, Library of Congress. Robert J. Breckinridge to Editor, June 25, 1849, *The Examiner*, July 7, 1849; *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, June 27, 1849.

² *The Kentucky Reporter* [Lexington], June 9, 16, 30, 1830.

to your exciting prejudices in a manner that I will not submit to."³ Breckinridge not only withdrew from politics but also left the legal profession and entered the ministry after studying in the Princeton Theological Seminary.

Although the slavery question resulted in Breckinridge's withdrawal from politics, he did not cease his efforts to influence the destiny and the course of the institution of slavery. He was one of the leaders of the American Colonization Society in Kentucky. As most southern branches of the society, the Kentucky members were divided between those who viewed the society as an instrument to strengthen slavery by removing free blacks and those who agreed with Breckinridge that the ultimate aim of the society should be that of a gradual abolition of slavery in Kentucky. When the basic purpose of the society came under dispute in Kentucky in 1830, the members of the Kentucky society sustained Breckinridge, and others who opposed gradual emancipation gradually withdrew from the society.⁴

In 1831, Breckinridge explained his ideas on colonization before the Colonization Society of Kentucky: "The light of reason, history and philosophy, the voice of nature and religion, the Spirit of God himself proclaims, that the being he created in his own image, he must have created free."⁵ He told his audience that whatever was contrary to the laws of nature and justice could not endure without destroying society.⁶ Two years later in an article appearing in the *Biblical Repository* (which was reprinted) he condemned immediate abolitionism but warned his countrymen that slavery could not endure. He urged support for colonization as the only safe way of dealing with the problem short of revolution.⁷

Five years later, after moving to Baltimore, Breckinridge delivered the principle address before the Maryland Colonization Society and again assailed abolitionism as a danger to the fabric of society. It was a foreign scheme he charged. Colonization was the work of establishing the Kingdom of God upon the earth. By colonization he contended "We are planting the gospel of God" and

³ *The Kentucky Reporter*, August 4, 1830.

⁴ *Reply of Robert Wickliffe to Robert J. Breckinridge* (Lexington: The Observer and Reporter Press, 1841), p. 44. For a study of the controversy between Breckinridge and Robert Wickliffe see: Hambleton Tapp, "The Slavery Controversy between Robert Wickliffe and Robert J. Breckinridge Prior to the Civil War," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, 19 (July, 1945), 156-70.

⁵ Robert J. Breckinridge, *Address Delivered Before the Colonization Society of Kentucky at Frankfort on the 6th Day of January, 1831* (Frankfort: A. G. Hodges, 1831), p. 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷ Robert J. Breckinridge, *Hints on Colonization and Abolition, With Reference to the Black Race* (n. p., n. d.), pp. 15, 16-20, 24.

redeeming Africa.⁸ By taking the position of gradual emancipation he was under the fire of both the abolitionists and proslavery advocates. In 1838, a copy of the *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*, which he published in Maryland at the time, was seized in the post office of Petersburg, Virginia and burned on the ground that it was incendiary.⁹

As one of Breckinridge's enemies observed, he was driven from politics and took refuge in the Church, but he did not lose any time in speaking out against slavery. In 1832, he introduced resolutions in the Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky which called on all ministers and members to endeavor to instruct slaves in the knowledge of the gospel, to promote all proper measures for gradual voluntary emancipation, and to aid the Colonization Society.¹⁰ The resolutions were tabled and eventually indefinitely postponed, but the substance of the measures was eventually adopted in 1835 under a plan proposed by a committee headed by John C. Young, President of Centre College.¹¹

In the 1830's public sentiment in favor of emancipation seemed to be gaining ground in Kentucky. In 1833, the Kentucky General Assembly passed a nonimportation act which prohibited the importation of slaves into Kentucky. Breckinridge was one of the principle leaders in the movement to secure the adoption of the law.¹² In 1837, the Legislature passed a Convention bill which would have permitted the revision of the Constitution if ratified by the people in two consecutive referendums. The emancipationists were hopeful of bringing the question of gradual emancipation and colonization before the convention and extensively circulated handbills and pamphlets among the people.¹³ The ratification of the bill, however, was defeated in the referendum of 1838. The emancipationists continued to agitate the question, and on January 10, 1847, a bill for a constitutional convention passed both houses of the legislature and was sustained by a majority of the voters in August, 1847 and 1848.

⁸ Robert J. Breckinridge, *Address Delivered Before the Maryland Colonization Society* (Pittsburgh: Christian Herald Office, 1838), pp. 7, 12, 19.

⁹ *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* (February, 1838), pp. 58-83.

¹⁰ *Reply of Robert Wickliffe to Robert J. Breckinridge*, p. 60.

¹¹ *Address of the Synod of Kentucky on Slavery in 1835* (Pittsburgh: United Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1862), pp. 19-20.

¹² *Acts of the General Assembly, 1832-1833*, p. 238. Robert J. Breckinridge, *Speech Delivered in the Court Yard at Lexington, Kentucky, October 12, 1840 in Reply to a Speech of Robert Wickliffe* (Lexington, 1840), 16ff.

¹³ "To the Citizens of Kentucky," by "C," July 18, 1838, Handbill, Library of Congress. This was a plan of emancipation copied after that formerly adopted by New York. See also: "To the Voters of Bourbon County," by "Convention," Bourbon, July 14, 1838. Handbills, Library of Congress.

Early in 1847, Robert J. Breckinridge, who was then President of Jefferson College, Pennsylvania, decided to leave his office and return to Kentucky. A Presbyterian Church in Lexington, Kentucky was open. William L. Breckinridge thought it was providential the way opportunities opened up for his brother Robert to return to Kentucky at the same time that the great work of emancipation appeared on the horizon. "I do not doubt that the hand of God is in it all and has ordered it just as it is," he wrote his brother Bob.¹⁴ In June, 1847, the press announced that Breckinridge had resigned the presidency of Jefferson College and had accepted the pastoral charge of the First Presbyterian Church of Lexington, Kentucky.¹⁵

No informed person doubted that Robert Breckinridge would become the leader of the emancipationists in their efforts to get prospective gradual emancipation written into the new constitution. In September, 1847, Governor William Owsley appointed Breckinridge as Superintendent of Public Instruction for the State of Kentucky to replace Reverend Ryland T. Dillard who had resigned.¹⁶ Events appeared to be shaping up for a great cause. As Superintendent of Public Instruction, Breckinridge would have contacts in the state capitol as well as in the county seats throughout the state.

Since 1830 Breckinridge had shunned politics and had taken no part in local or party campaigns. Although he claimed no allegiance to any party, he found himself deeply involved in a contest which he hoped would be considered a public question and not made a party issue. But as the question took shape along party lines, Breckinridge did not hesitate to enter the political arena for a cause which he considered both patriotic and sacred.¹⁷

Breckinridge was too realistic to assume that even gradual emancipation could be established forthwith, but he hoped that others would see emancipation as inevitable as he saw it. During his first year back in Kentucky he devoted much time and effort to secure a commitment from the political leaders to agree to a plan for prospective gradual emancipation with colonization written into the new Constitution. This compromise position he argued would avert a political storm which would burst upon the state in a con-

14 W. L. Breckinridge to R. J. Breckinridge, February 26, 1847, Breckinridge Family Papers.

15 *The Frankfort Commonwealth*, June 22, 1847.

16 Clipping, No. 23678, September, 1847, Breckinridge Family Papers.

17 R. J. Breckinridge to William Warfield, December 15, 1860 in *The Kentucky Statesman*, [Frankfort], January 1, 1861.

test for gradual emancipation immediately undertaken.¹⁸

Breckinridge did what he could to broaden the base of the emancipation support and to prepare the antislavery advocates for the contest ahead. Efforts were made to consolidate the strength in the Kentucky Colonization Society. Breckinridge's recent article from the *African Repository* was printed in *The Examiner*, the organ of the emancipationist party in Kentucky. The article concisely and clearly summed up the case against slavery: "What is slavery as it exists among us? We reply, it is that condition . . . in which one portion of the community, called masters, is allowed such power over another portion called slaves, as, 1. To deprive them of the entire earnings of their own labor . . . thus committing *clear* robbery. 2. To reduce them to the necessity of universal concubinage, by denying to them the civil rights of marriage . . . and encouraging *universal* prostitution. 3. To deprive them of the means and opportunities of moral and intellectual culture. 4. To set up between parents and children an authority higher than the impulse of nature and the laws of God . . ."²⁰

Breckinridge believed the greatest need of the emancipation movement was a viable emancipation plan which could give assurance to all classes of society. In December, 1848, he drew up such a plan which he published in the *Lexington Observer and Reporter* under the pen-name "Fayette." He proposed to engraft in the new Constitution provisions which would free all slaves at the age of twenty-five that were born after the Constitution was adopted. At the age of twenty-five these slaves would be placed under public authority and held to service until the proceeds of their labor would be sufficient to transport them to Liberia. No slaves could be imported into the state once the Constitution was adopted, but slaveholders could dispose of their slaves at a profit if they chose up until the day they were twenty-five. Breckinridge contended that the plan would not injure the slaveholder or interfere with existing property rights. It was humane to the slave and it would make Kentucky exclusively a state of free white men. "Emancipation is not the main thing — not even a main thing except as it may aid an object more important than itself," he argued, "*Unity of race, and that the white race for Kentucky.*"²¹

18 "The Question of Slavery and the New Constitution" by Robert J. Breckinridge, *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, June 30, 1849

19 R. J. Breckinridge to S. R. Williams, November 17, 1848, Breckinridge Family Papers.

20 *African Repository* cited by *The Examiner*, [Louisville] November 6, 1847.

21 "Fayette," "Unity of Race—and That the White Race—For Kentucky," *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, December 16, 1848; W. L. Breckinridge to R. J. Breckinridge, February 6, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

Breckinridge's "Fayette" letter was given additional publicity when his brother William Breckinridge of Louisville advocated the plan in a series of articles in the *Louisville Democrat* without revealing Robert Breckinridge's identity. Since the Breckinridge brothers were in complete agreement concerning the goals and objectives of the emancipation movement, they shared ideas freely and encouraged each other.²² During February and March, emancipation activities in Jefferson County advanced more rapidly than developments in other counties. As a result, William became more active than Robert. Recognizing his brother as the natural leader of the movement William Breckinridge impatiently wrote "Bob" on March 17, "I think you ought to come out more fully than you have done—Why do not the friends of the cause have a public meeting in Lexington?" On the same day Robert Breckinridge acted to come out more fully in the cause by publishing his second "Fayette" letter in the *Lexington Observer and Reporter*.²³

In February the Kentucky legislature had repealed the Law of 1833 which Cassius M. Clay, Thomas Marshall, and Robert Breckinridge had worked for so nobly. The repeal of this law opened Kentucky to the importation of slaves. Breckinridge was still firmly opposed to the importation of slaves into Kentucky. The legislature also passed a resolution to the effect that it was opposed to emancipation "in any form or shape whatever."²⁴ Breckinridge saw these measures as the work of political parties yielding to expediency and appeals to prejudice. "The *leaders of party* are bent on party ends. When were they ever bent on anything more noble and more lasting?" Fayette wrote. "It would be a mercy to the State to crush them all," he added. The traders in politics were at work again. "Oh that God in his goodness would raise up for the great work on which we are about to embark. . . . *men* worthy of the crisis!" Breckinridge lamented.²⁵

The state-wide organization of the Emancipation party got under way after the emancipationists of Louisville held a local meeting to organize politically. William Breckinridge introduced measures calling for a state convention to meet in Frankfort. At the request of the members of the convention, he drew up an

²² *Louisville Democrat*, February 14, 16, 1849 cited by *The Examiner*, March 3, 1849; W. L. Breckinridge to R. J. Breckinridge, February 14, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

²³ W. L. Breckinridge to R. J. Breckinridge, February 14, March 17, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

²⁴ Asa E. Martin, *The Anti-Slavery Movement in Kentucky Prior to 1850* (Louisville: The Standard Printing Company, 1918), p. 96; "The Question of Slavery and the New Constitution" by Robert J. Breckinridge, *The Examiner*, July 21, 1849.

²⁵ "Fayette," *Lexington Observer and Reporter* cited by *The Examiner*, March 17, 1849.

address to the people of the state. Local conventions followed throughout the state. The Emancipation party of Lexington met in convention on April 14. Henry Clay made a few eloquent remarks and Robert Breckinridge rose and spoke on the emancipation question.²⁶

Breckinridge was forty-nine years old in 1849. He was tall and slender; his hair was long, dark, and sprinkled with gray, with sideburns extending practically to his chin. His teeth retreated between his nose and chin, and the hair of his forehead was more inclined to extend towards his eyebrows than to retreat in the opposite direction; his eyes were deep-set, keen, gray, and intelligent; his nose was long and handsome. Clad in long, dark, ministerial coat, high collar, and wide, twice-wrapped black cravat, his appearance was distinguished, but his whole appearance showed no great care. He usually spoke long but rarely wearied his audience. His power of impression was very good; his wit keen; his sarcasm like scalding oil. He was specious, often cunning, always adroit. With his dignity of carriage, grace of gesture, mellowness of voice, charm of manner, he made an attractive and magnetic impression.²⁷

After speaking, Breckinridge offered the following resolutions: "Considering that hereditary domestic slavery as it exists among us, (1) Is contrary to the rights of mankind; (2) Is opposed to the fundamental principles of free government; (3) Is inconsistent with a State of sound morality; (4) Is hostile to the prosperity of the commonwealth . . . [therefore] . It ought not to be perpetuated." The resolutions urged that steps be taken in the Constitutional Convention to ameliorate slavery. So that a common platform could be agreed upon, the resolutions were unanimously adopted, and Breckinridge was selected as one of the delegates to the Frankfort Convention.²⁸

When the State Emancipation Convention met in Frankfort on April 25, it was composed of two groups of emancipationists. One faction wanted to engraft on the new constitution some scheme of prospective gradual emancipation. Another more numerous group wanted to insert the non-importation law of 1833 into the new constitution. This faction also wanted to insert an "open

²⁶ *Louisville Morning Courier*, April 17, 1849.

²⁷ *New York Daily Times*, May 31, 1853; Hambleton Tapp, "Robert J. Breckinridge During the Civil War," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, 11 (April, 1937), 121.

²⁸ "The Question of Slavery and the New Constitution," by Robert J. Breckinridge, *The Examiner*, July 21, 1849.

clause" in the constitution which would permit the legislature to call a convention at any time to consider the question of emancipation as a separate matter.²⁹ Breckinridge presented his views concerning the Emancipation party platform: "It is, I believe, a hopeless task to strive to get a specific plan engrafted in the new Constitution; but I verily believe, a most promising and hopeful task, [is] to look to the plan by action hereafter through the Legislature. Let us struggle to make the policy since 1833 the policy of the State in all future time, and to provide in the new Constitution for the adoption of such plan as may be deemed wisest by the Legislature."³⁰

This was not the position of the "Fayette" letter of December, 1848. Breckinridge had pragmatically put aside his inclination to engraft a specific plan of prospective gradual emancipation in the constitution. Eight days before the Frankfort Convention he wrote a friend: "I incline to the opinion that we ought to demand the insertion of a system of emancipation . . . in the Constitution itself and fight the battle on that issue . . . if we succeed, we gain what we think is right; and if we fail, besides doing our duty, we still have nearly as good a chance of getting the next lower thing, as if we went directly for it." Breckinridge was uneasy about the necessity of doing what he could against slavery during the lifetime of his generation: "I surely shall not be here to discharge my conscience fifty years later. I therefore, better do it now."³¹

Breckinridge drew up the resolutions which were reported by the resolutions committee. His preamble stated that slavery was adverse to the prosperity of the state, inconsistent with the fundamental principles of free government, contrary to the natural rights of mankind, and injurious to a pure state of morals. It ought therefore not to be perpetuated in the Commonwealth. The second item in the preamble drawn up by Breckinridge assured the slaveholders that no attempt would be made to carry out compulsory emancipation without compensation. This measure was amended on the floor with Breckinridge's consent and concurrence to read: "Any scheme of emancipation ought to be prospective, operating exclusively upon slaves born after the adoption of the scheme and connected with colonization." The resolutions that followed set forth three principles: (1) Absolute prohibition of

²⁹ *The Central Watchman* [Cincinnati], May 4, 1849.

³⁰ *New York Daily Tribune*, [Supplement] May 11, 1849.

³¹ R. J. Breckinridge to Samuel Steel, April 17, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

importation; (2) The complete power of the people to enforce and perfect a system of emancipation in or under the new constitution; (3) The commitment of the convention to confine its recommendations to the subject of slavery.³²

During the convention Breckinridge was asked if he was willing to sacrifice his political principles to carry out emancipation. The reporter for the *Examiner* wished that all could have heard the "bold, manly, indignant, noble and eloquent response."

"I can, and I will" was the instant and unhesitating reply. "What am I expected" said Breckinridge, "to sacrifice to my political feelings and party? The personal freedom of two hundred thousand of my fellow-beings. . . . ; their rights to the free use of their own bodies and their own souls; their right to use the proceeds of their labor and the sweat of their brows; and the right of teaching and being taught God's holy word. What kind of a state of society would that be . . . in which the marriage relation was abolished by law, in which no man had any wife in particular, and no woman any husband in particular, where universal concubinage prevailed, and no child knew his own father, and no father knew his own child. It would be all hell upon earth. That, Sir, is negro Slavery."

The reporter called attention to the expanded form, the flashing eyes, the indignant look, the rapid interchange over the countenance, of the pathos, of benevolent expression, and of shame and indignation which gave effect to the speech. The reporter concluded that all who were there "saw the very genius of Kentucky"—saw all that was noble, elevated, benevolent, bold and fearless in the Kentucky character, "inspired and informed by the genius of Christianity."³³ The *Louisville Morning Courier* spoke of Breckinridge's speech as "the most eloquent, impressive and forcible address ever heard" by those present at the convention. A correspondent from Kentucky to the Presbyterian *New York Observer* wrote that "Human eloquence has never reached a higher flight, never produced a deeper effect."³⁴

After the Frankfort Convention, the Fayette County Emancipation party held a ratification meeting, and Breckinridge presented the Frankfort resolutions which were approved. He spoke for two hours and suggested that the convention nominate Henry Clay

³² *The Central Watchman*, May 4, 1849. "The Question of Slavery and the New Constitution," by Robert Breckinridge, *Examiner*, July 21, 1849; Robert J. Breckinridge, "The Question of Negro Slavery and the New Constitution of Kentucky," *Princeton Review*, October, 1849, p. 584. Breckinridge claimed that the Frankfort resolutions left the emancipation candidate in each district free to run a program to engraft a special plan in the constitution or on the open clause. He was no doubt referring to the second resolution which proposed giving the people the power to perfect a system of emancipation "in or under the new Constitution."

³³ *The Examiner* cited by *Western Christian Journal* [Cincinnati], June 29, 1849.

³⁴ Correspondent to Editor, *New York Observer*, May 19, 1849.

as a delegate to the State Convention. Clay declined because of his obligations as United States Senator and because of his delicate health. Breckinridge was nominated as one of the delegates to the State Convention, and a week later he addressed the people of Fayette County at the Courthouse and accepted the nomination "in a speech which, for soul-stirring eloquence and deep convincing argument" had "seldom, if ever, been equalled" and never surpassed. By his skillful presentation of the subject, his forcible illustrations and powerful enforcement of the subject, a perceptive member of the audience felt that he had already dwarfed his opponents. Breckinridge had the address printed, and it was widely circulated throughout the state at the request of local emancipation committees. Breckinridge's printed and published speeches were used as campaign material and quoted by other speakers throughout the state. Individuals testified that they had been converted to emancipation by Breckinridge's sincerity and logic.³⁵

Even before the Frankfort Convention Breckinridge had received invitations to speak before local groups in the state on the question of emancipation.³⁶ During May and June, requests poured in urging Breckinridge to address local Emancipation parties throughout the state.³⁷ The emancipationists were particularly insistent that Breckinridge meet Ben Hardin, a Democrat, who had assailed Breckinridge from the platform in Bardstown and had challenged Breckinridge, as the "great Presbyterian wrangler," to debate the slavery question. Hardin informed his audiences that he had sharpened his teeth to have them in good condition to eat Breckinridge alive. Hardin carried his campaign beyond Nelson County into adjoining counties and denounced Breckinridge and the clergy with bitter words. He continued his violent attacks on the "Black Coats," as he called the clergy, throughout the canvass. He abused John C. Young and Robert Breckinridge without mercy. In June, the *Examiner* reported that Breckinridge would meet Hardin on

³⁵ *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, May 16, 1849; *Louisville Morning Courier*, May 18, 1849; *The Examiner*, June 2, 1849; Frank Ballenger to R. J. Breckinridge, July 2, 1849; S. S. Pinkerton to R. J. Breckinridge, July 5, 1849; Cabel Harrison to R. J. Breckinridge, June 1, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers. See: W. O. Smith's Speech, Bourbon County Court, *The Louisville Morning Courier*, July 4, 1849.

³⁶ Samuel Steel to R. J. Breckinridge, March 20, 1849; William O. Smith to R. J. Breckinridge, April 7, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

³⁷ The following correspondents to R. J. Breckinridge: W. O. Smith, April 28, May 30, 1849; J. T. Kemper, April 20, 1849; W. J. Burgess, May 2, 1849; William Hewlett, May 8, 1849; Benjamin Mills, May 11, 1849; James Matthews, May 30, 1849; Green River Committee, May 21, 1849; William Garrett, May 22, June 12, 1849; W. R. Hervey, May 15, 1849; D. P. Bedinger, May 24, 1849; C. A. Preston, May 28, 1849; Frank Ballinger May 31, 1849; Evans Stevenson, May 31, 1849; C. W. Anderson, June 8, 1849; R. C. Grundy, June 17, 1849; J. T. Boyle, June 20, 1849, and others, Breckinridge Family Papers.

the platform in Bardstown to debate the subject of emancipation.³⁸

In May, Breckinridge advised the Scott County Emancipation party that circumstances beyond his control prevented him from accepting their invitation to speak in Georgetown. After his nomination as a Fayette County delegate the number of invitations was so great he could not answer them personally. In June, he published a card in the press announcing that the requests to speak throughout the state were too numerous to answer personally. Since Fayette County had seen fit to nominate him as a delegate, Breckinridge stated that he considered it his duty to spend most of his time canvassing Fayette County even though he preferred being free to accept invitations outside the boundaries of his constituency.³⁹ As the August 3 election day drew near, Breckinridge disclosed to his constituents that it was his greatest desire to see Kentucky made the exclusive abode of the free whites. "One of the leading motives of all my conduct with this subject has been the hope of substituting the race of negro slaves with the race of free whites," he confessed. As he continued to canvass Fayette County he delivered an address on June 11 in Lexington, and near the end of the month he wrote an expanded article for the *Lexington Observer and Reporter* in which he fully explained his views on emancipation and colonization.⁴⁰

"I oppose, absolutely, the importation of any more slaves into Kentucky," he emphasized with firmness in his article. He urged the people to close the door against the importation of slaves into the state, "not as a scheme of emancipation, but as a scheme of preservation; . . . as a national testimony to humanity and civilization." Breckinridge pointed out that the convention party had avowed that the open clause was a settled question in public opinion in 1847 and the party had pledged itself to the open clause in the party address. But the Democratic party had seen new light and early in 1849 it denounced the open clause as an abolition contrivance, even though the address of 1847 was signed by the powerful

38 J. I. Speed to R. J. Breckinridge, May 12, 23, 1849; W. M. Allen to R. J. Breckinridge, June 8, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers. *The Louisville Weekly Courier*, June 2, 1849; *The Louisville Morning Courier*, July 24, 1849; *The Examiner*, June 2, July 28, 1849. There is no evidence that Breckinridge and Hardin debated the subject of emancipation in 1849.

39 *Georgetown Herald* cited by *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, May 19, June 27, 1849. Breckinridge did speak outside of Fayette County in Danville and South Elkhorn in July. See: Robert J. Breckinridge to Master Robert J. Breckinridge, July 25, 1849, John Warren Grigsby Collection, The Filson Club. Hambleton Tapp says Breckinridge "did agree to speak in a few nearby towns, such as Paris and Winchester." Hambleton Tapp, "Robert J. Breckinridge and the Year 1849," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, 12 (July, 1938) 141.

40 *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, May 16, 19, 23, 30; June 9, 30, 1849; *Louisville Morning Courier*, May 18, 1849; *The Presbyterian Advocate*, August 8, 1849; *The Examiner*, June 2, 1849.

Democrats, Thomas Metcalfe and Ben Hardin. The Whig party and press rapidly discovered the same light and committed itself to slavery. He urged the people not to let mere party names and ends seduce them from their honest convictions. "From beginning to end, the whole proceeding has been a disreputable party juggle. . . The main spring amongst all parties was a mutual apprehension of each other, under a general struggle for party aggrandisement," Breckinridge charged.⁴¹

Turning to the moral aspects of the question, Breckinridge found the principles of the Emancipation party to be sanctioned in the heart of the national religion which taught nothing more plainly or with higher emphasis than that those who owed to the mercy of God their own lives, liberties, and happiness were utterly inexcusable in treating with indifference, much more in sacrificing to their own selfish ends, the lives, liberties, or happiness of others. "The loud cry that goes up from the awakened earth, and the universal voice of nations shouting in hope, will not fall unheeded upon the ears of her [Kentucky's] generous people. When the day has come for mankind to break their chains and burst open their prisons she will not select that day to consecrate her soil to eternal slavery, and dedicate her children to eternal wrong."⁴² A well-known clergyman of the Disciples of Christ Church of Kentucky read the article and wrote Breckinridge that the providence of God had pointed him out as His apostle for the work in Kentucky. He urged Breckinridge to have the article printed as the best instrument to carry emancipation in Kentucky. He committed himself to bear ten dollars of the expense. Other commended Breckinridge for the high quality of his address and hailed him as the providential leader of the emancipationists in the south.⁴³

Since Breckinridge found it impossible to meet speaking engagements outside of Fayette County, he turned to his pen as a means of influencing the state at large. On June 30, the same day his article was published in the *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, it was sent to the *Louisville Courier*. The article was printed in pamphlet form and bundles of the printed address were

⁴¹ *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, June 30, July 4, 1849; *The Examiner*, July 21, 1849; *The Louisville Morning Courier*, July 21, 1849; "The Question of Negro Slavery, and the New Constitution," July 3, 1849, Manuscript Pamphlet, Breckinridge Family Papers.

⁴² *The Louisville Morning Courier*, July 21, 1849. *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, July 4, 1849. For a discussion of Breckinridge's *Observer and Reporter* article see: Hambleton Tapp, "Robert J. Breckinridge and the Year 1849," 139-41.

⁴³ S. S. Pinkerton to R. J. Breckinridge, July 5, 1849. Frank Ballenger to R. J. Breckinridge, July 2, 1849; John Lillie to R. J. Breckinridge, July 24, 1848, Breckinridge Family Papers.

distributed to local emancipation committees as the date of the election approached.⁴⁴ While the campaign raged, the epidemic of cholera, which had begun in the late spring, reached its zenith during July. The scourge seemed to have spread more disastrously among the population of Lexington than any other city of the state. There the disease broke out in the mental institution and spread rapidly through the city. Speaking engagements were cancelled because many people fled the city and others were afraid to attend public meetings. In spite of the epidemic the campaign moved on.⁴⁵ Though never well, Breckinridge managed to keep going. On July 14, he wrote a friend:

"I would go down (to Gilead and speak) if it were proper for me to leave the city. My friends and neighbors are sick and dying around me—and my service needed by many of them; so that it is improper for me to be away a whole day, unless under very urgent circumstances. The cholera continues to prevail very severely; and from eight to twelve persons die every twenty-four hours. There are perhaps ten persons sick for every one that dies; and a great many of the people are gone off from fright. So that such of us as are well, and disposed to do anything cannot be spared very well."⁴⁶

Breckinridge spent much time visiting the ill and conducting funerals.

During the campaign Samuel Shy, the other Emancipation candidate for the convention from Fayette, was struck by the cholera. The two proslavery candidates were also stricken, and one died. John C. Breckinridge who was running as a Democrat for the Fayette County seat in the House of Representatives tried to steer clear of the convention issues, but with both proslavery candidates for the convention unable to carry on the canvass he was induced to temporarily abandon his own canvass and meet his uncle in debate.⁴⁷ Despite the course of events Breckinridge stuck to his post and carried on his campaign with a strong hand. He informed his mother that under the circumstances he could not spare the time to visit her. "My canvass for the convention (which I consider a religious duty—as fully as to preach the gospel)," Breckinridge wrote, demanded his time. His wife, who had left the city because of delicate health, was expecting a child. She

⁴⁴ *Louisville Morning Courier*, July 21, 1849; R. J. Breckinridge to J. G. Simrall, July 21, 1849; John Lillie to R. J. Breckinridge, July 24, 1849; Richard Martin to R. J. Breckinridge, no date; Lewis Tappan to R. J. Breckinridge, June 9, 1850, Breckinridge Family Papers.

⁴⁵ *Lexington Atlas* cited by Madison [Indiana], *Daily Courier*, June 4, 1849; *Louisville Weekly Journal*, June 16, 1849.

⁴⁶ R. J. Breckinridge to Richard Martin, July 14, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

⁴⁷ James G. Leach to A. B. Meek, Newcastle, Kentucky, July 22, 1860; *Nashville Union and American*, August 17, 1860.

worried about his health and fatigue from his strenuous efforts. She urged him to avoid getting over-excited about the election.⁴⁸

When the results were in, the Emancipation party suffered a total defeat. Breckinridge could console himself by recognizing that he had done his duty. Near the end of the campaign he saw that defeat was inevitable, but he was cheered by news from his family. On July 21, his daughter wrote that he was the father of a fine boy. "He is the beginning, I suppose, of a new race of Blue-Stockings and Abolitionists." Looking back at the past and recent events he was determined to be more resolute in the noble cause. He wrote his wife that "the struggle in some respects" had only begun.⁴⁹

After the election Breckinridge prepared an article for the *Princeton Review*. He contended that the emancipationists had not been defeated by the slaveholders, who represented only a small minority of the voters, but by the votes of the non-slaveholders. These non-slaveholders had a great prejudice against the Negroes as a laboring class and as a race. The non-slaveholders should be brought to see that they are committing a sin against God, as well as inflicting a grievous injury on their fellow men, by supporting an indefinite continuance of slavery. They must be taught that slavery was a collective and national sin. "We believe that the advocates of emancipation will yet succeed," Breckinridge prophesied, "if they can but keep up before the minds of the people the great principle of Duty."⁵⁰ With the aid of friends, Breckinridge considered establishing an emancipation newspaper in Lexington. Since the owners of the *Examiner* were considering closing their newspaper, a discussion with them took place, but the plan never matured.⁵¹ Breckinridge later found use of his talents in the service of a journal established to contest the ratification of the Constitution.

Breckinridge looked to the Colonization Society as an institution which had taken on a new importance for Kentucky. In October, the Kentucky Colonization Society met in the First Presbyterian

48 W. L. Breckinridge to R. J. Breckinridge, July 10, 1849; R. J. Breckinridge to Mother, July 6, 1849; Virginia Breckinridge to R. J. Breckinridge, July 14, 29, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

49 Sally Breckinridge to R. J. Breckinridge, July 21, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers; R. J. Breckinridge to Virginia Breckinridge, August 8, 1849, John Warren Grigsby Collection, The Filson Club.

50 Robert J. Breckinridge, "The Question of Negro Slavery and the New Constitution of Kentucky," *Princeton Review*, October, 1849, pp. 586-87, 604.

51 I. A. Jacobs to R. J. Breckinridge, August 24, 1849; John H. Heywood to R. J. Breckinridge, September 18, 1849, Breckinridge Family Papers.

Church of Louisville, and Breckinridge delivered the leading address. Kentucky, he said, had a more profound interest in colonization than any other state. There would be new demands on the society as the recent discussion of slavery during the canvass for the convention would promote individual emancipation.⁵²

With the proslavery forces in complete control of the convention, Breckinridge's opponents did not relax their attacks on him. In the convention, Hardin characterized him as a man "who, instead of attending to the duties for which he was elected, and paid by the people [The superintendent of public instruction] is going about making speeches, the tendency of which is to incite our negroes to cut our throats, and to burn our houses and villages. That is the tendency of the doctrine preached by the superintendent of education during the last year."⁵³ When the legislature met in 1850, Breckinridge was very severely attacked as an emancipationist but the legislature implemented the proposals recommended in his report.⁵⁴ Breckinridge received more praise for his work in the emancipation controversy than any of his colleagues or opponents.⁵⁵ The *Louisville Courier* had high praise for Breckinridge and his brother. The people owed "the two Breckinridges . . . a debt of gratitude" that could not be easily discharged. "We rejoice," the editor announced, "that in the struggle between right and wrong, they were not cold, selfish, niggardly and cowardly calculators, but, that in the hour of conflict their voices were heard in favor of truth, and their right arms were bared for sustaining it."⁵⁶

Breckinridge was determined to continue the contest. Now that emancipation could not be written into the constitution, he opposed the constitution but concentrated on other objections to it. He was invited to serve as a correspondent for *The Old Guard*, the organ of the opponents of the new constitution. Breckinridge wrote under the pen-name of "A Citizen." In the first number of *The Old Guard*, he criticized the constitution because it required such a long period to amend, and in later numbers he pointed out the contradictions written into the constitution and the weaknesses in the court provisions and the school fund.⁵⁷ He supplied a series

⁵² *The Examiner*, November 3, 1849.

⁵³ *Report of the Debate and Proceedings of the Convention for the Revision of the Constitution of the State of Kentucky, 1849* (Frankfort: Commonwealth Press, 1850), p. 884.

⁵⁴ R. J. Breckinridge to R. S. Williams, February 27, 1850, Breckinridge Family Papers.

⁵⁵ S. R. Williams to R. J. Breckinridge, April 10, 1850, Breckinridge Family Papers.

⁵⁶ *The Louisville Morning Courier*, July 10, 1849.

⁵⁷ Thomas F. Marshall to R. J. Breckinridge, March 28, 1850, Breckinridge Family Papers; *The Old Guard* [Frankfort], February 6, 1850, I, No. 1, p. 11; February 21, 1850, I, No. 3, pp. 62-64. *Lexington Observer and Reporter*, February 6, 1850.

of eight articles by "A Citizen," and undertook a new series under the name of "Plebian." The purpose of the "Plebian" articles was to win the common man away from the ranks of the Democratic party and from support of the new Constitution.

Breckinridge continued to be the most effective advocate of gradual emancipation in Kentucky during the 1850's. He believed he had "nothing in common with unscrupulous leaders of any party," and although he avoided involvement in the political affairs of the day, Breckinridge lost no opportunity to reconstruct political alignment to reflect a division on principles and issues.⁵⁸ If political divisions reflected the real interests of the people, the problems growing out of Kentucky's domestic institution could be resolved. Breckinridge stood at the center of a small group of pragmatic reformers who envisioned a time when Kentucky would be a free state. When the Republican party was organized, the Kentucky emancipationists were willing to work for their goals within the framework of this party. During the Civil War Breckinridge became the recognized leader of the Union party of Kentucky which strongly supported Lincoln and worked for emancipation in Kentucky.⁵⁹ Breckinridge played a central role in the events which led to the gradual abolition of slavery in Kentucky without causing the state to secede from the Union. In his declining years he was gratified to see his sons take up his cause by leading the campaign in Kentucky to secure the right of blacks to testify against whites in the state courts.⁶⁰

58 R. J. Breckinridge to William Warfield, December 15, 1860, in *The Kentucky Statesman*, January 1, 1861.

59 Hambleton Tapp, "Robert J. Breckinridge During the Civil War," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, 11, (April, 1937), pp. 124, 137, 140.

60 Victor B. Howard, "The Breckinridge Family and the Black Testimony Controversy in Kentucky," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, 49 (January, 1975), 37-56.