

TITLE

TENNESSEE WHIGS, 1847-1861

By

Name

SCOTT RHODES

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Department of History of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Honors
in
History

Year

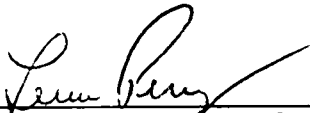
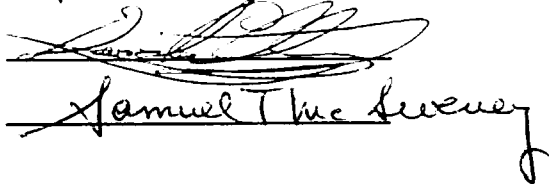
1991

On the basis of this thesis and of
the written and oral examinations
taken by the candidate on

April 12 and on April 15

we, the undersigned, recommend
that the candidate be awarded

Honors in History:

THE TENNESSEE WHIGS 1847-1861

HONORS THESIS FOR HISTORY 299

SUBMITTED BY SCOTT RHODES

APRIL 8, 1991

ADVISOR: PROFESSOR LEWIS PERRY

Through the history of the antebellum South would seem to lie a relatively well-worn path, marked by an immeasurable amount of literature. And for almost every book written on the topic the dominant theme is often the peculiarity of southern politics and southern disunionism. And for almost every writer there is added a variation on the answer for why the South seceded. Some may point to a single cataclysmic event or a series of minor events. Others view it as an almost evolutionary inevitability. Still others place the largest part of the responsibility on the shoulders of "crafty" southern radicals.

However all of these explanations have a common feature. They are all refracted through the lens of antebellum southern politics. The people of the South voiced their concerns, anger, and fear through their political institutions and their political leaders. The so-called southern fire-eater was not the creature of a political vacuum. His words and actions were not spontaneous. They were reflective of a significant tide of resentment and defensiveness rolling through the South. But this cautionary posturing did not always equate into a determination to see the South gain its independence as a separate Confederacy. The counterpart to the southern fire-eater was the southern conservative. Like the fire-eater he was sensitive to attacks on southern rights, but felt at the same time these wrongs could be amended without measures as drastic as secession. And also like the southern fire-eater, his political positioning had a sound popular basis.

Because of the way events turned out, it is usually the southern conservative that is neglected in overviews of the era. He did not "win" the political struggle because secession did, in fact, take place and with it his calls for conciliation and compromise were silenced by a majority of his constituents. However, in some areas of the South -- particularly the upper South -- his cries rang true longer than in others.

The state of Tennessee was one such area. Conservatism was a trademark of state politics that persisted into the secession crisis and beyond, cutting across party lines in the process. Although bipartisan in its appeal, the degrees of conservatism did vary between the two major parties -- the Whigs and the Democrats. By far Whigs tended to lean more toward the political right than their Democratic rivals and this tendency was frequently accented on state as well as national legislation, particularly in regards to the slavery extension issue.

As a result, Whigs remained distinctly different from Democrats and thus retained an independent political identity. They did so not because they chose to be but because Tennessee voters still had important state and local issues to differ upon that were as significant to them or moreso than national issues, like slavery extension. Unlike most southern states, this two party system remained firmly in place throughout the 1850's and up until the outbreak of war. Whiggery simply refused to die, though it did stumble at times. It did not disappear because its message was still a valid one and because party rivalry was so

deeply ingrained.

This thesis attempts to explain exactly how Whiggery remained not only potent, but competitive, for so long in Tennessee. After surviving near fatal blows in 1854 and 1857, by 1860 Whiggery was alive and well and even promising to reclaim its Whig name. The war, of course, stopped any thoughts of a complete comeback, but it is interesting to ponder what could have been. Just four months before entering the war Tennessee had voted decidedly conservative on the issue, which boded well for a party seeking to de-emphasize sectional politics and return to matters of immediate local concern.

Nonetheless, slavery and slavery extension were southern concerns and southern concerns were, by nature, Tennessee concerns. Try as they could, this issue remained the proverbial monkey on the back of Tennessee Whigs. When Tennessee voters were finally faced with the choice of union and possible harm to the peculiar institution or disunion and the protection of slavery, they chose the latter. The Whigs had gambled and lost not because they believed Tennessee voters would act any differently when confronted with such an alternative, but because they hoped to avoid the ultimatum altogether. When the moment did come, Tennessee Whigs revealed they were southerners first and partisan loyalists second.

Chapter 1: Prosperity and Decline

On October 11, 1847, Isham G. Harris, a young Democrat from Paris, Tennessee, stood up in the state general assembly in order to submit some strongly pro-southern resolutions concerning the territories expected to be obtained after the Mexican War. Harris's resolutions specifically focused on whether or not slavery would be allowed to advance into these new territories. The controversy over this issue had been brought out into the open by David Wilmot's attempt to attach a proviso to the Two-Million Dollar Bill in the U.S. House on August 8, 1846. The bill and its proviso died two days later in the Senate, but the sectional animosity it aroused and the intraparty stresses it created refused to disappear.

The resolutions offered by Harris included: a suggestion that the General Assembly warn the people of the purposeful attack on slavery by abolitionists, adoption of measures which, by "vindicating the guarantees of the constitution," would check this drive, a refutation of the right of Congress to legislate upon slavery in the territories (similar to the Virginia Resolutions), and a refusal to support any presidential candidate who did not oppose the Proviso.¹ The resolutions were sent to the Committee on Federal Relations and returned to the senate in a more modified form. These reshaped resolutions avoided taking a clear position on the Proviso. They did, however, indicate

¹ Senate Journal 1847-1848. 508, 538-561.

that "Constitutional provisions were sufficient to guide Congress in its reference to slavery."² The Proviso was thus looked upon by the committee as antagonistic, but not necessarily unconstitutional. It was these modified resolutions that would pass the state senate. But why had Harris's resolutions been revamped in the first place? The answer is rather straightforward. Whigs controlled both the committee and the senate.

The reason for these modifications of the resolutions lay largely in one of the fundamental principles of Whig ideology-- the principle of active government involvement. This was at the crux of most issues that separated Democrats from Whigs and was thus an implied or explicit component of Whig opinions and platforms. This disagreement over the role of government was clearly reflected in the legislative action of both parties. Originally this disagreement was largely limited to the economic sphere. one of the main areas where future Whigs had split with Andrew Jackson in the 1830's and, thus, began to forge their identity as a second party. Each party accepted the notion that liberty -- meaning freedom from government despotism as well as personal freedom -- was economically defined. Whigs believed the attainment of this liberty was only possible via the expansion of a market economy and the availability of "soft" money, which would lead to greater wealth in circulation for one to achieve

²Campbell, Mary E. The Attitude of Tennesseans Toward the Union. New York: Vantage Press, 1961, 42.

financial independence. Whigs and Democrats, as a result, began to separate first on economic grounds, as J. Mills Thornton points out in his study of antebellum Alabama:

It is important to note that the Whigs did not abandon their fear that the government could become a despotism. It was just that the Jacksonians moved beyond the Whigs to the position that an active government would necessarily become a despotism -- as would any power center, such as a corporation, a bank, or any other collective force which impinged upon personal autonomy. Party debates were thus in essence a conflict between the Whigs' maintenance that the power of collective action could be harnessed to benefit society, and the Democrats' maintenance that no hand was strong enough for the reins.³

As the Whigs moved into the 1840's this principle of active government began to expand in scope to include more issues than the ones that had originally differentiated the two parties (e.g., the national bank, aid to internal improvements, and the subtreasury scheme). Tariffs, railroad construction, and, of course, slavery extension were rationalized so as to conform to the Whig principle of active government. This is undoubtedly a factor in explaining the response of Tennessee Whigs to Harris's resolutions. Tennessee Whigs, like their neighbor brethren in North Carolina, extended this principle to government legislation upon slavery in the territories, according to Marc Kruman.⁴ An

³ Thornton, J. Mills. Politics and Power in a Slave Society. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978, 56.

⁴ Kruman, Marc. Parties and Politics in North Carolina 1836-1865. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983, 117.

amendment like the Proviso was probably seen as unjust, but not necessarily unconstitutional to most Tennessee Whigs.

In addition to Whig ideology, there is the factor of immediate concern that a measure like the Proviso had for Tennessee. How vital was slavery and the survival of slavery to the Tennessee economy? As of 1850 Tennessee ranked eighth in slave population with 239,459 out of a total population of just over 1,000,000. East Tennessee, the traditional Whig stronghold throughout the 1840's and 50's, had by far the fewest slaves of any of the three sections. In 1850, East Tennessee contained none of the 15 counties that had slave populations over 5,000. Also, there was no county in East Tennessee with a slave population constituting more than 15% of the total population.⁵

Middle and West Tennessee had a greater stake by far in the future of slavery. There were definite trends toward a plantation system in West Tennessee and, at least, a semi-plantation system in Middle Tennessee.⁶ Approximately 200,000 of Tennessee's slaves were in these two regions and the capital that they represented was substantial. By the end of the 1850's 36% of all taxable property in West Tennessee and 24% of all taxable property in Middle Tennessee would be tied up in slaves.⁷

Slavery then, though not as dominant an institution as it

⁵ Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, vol. on pop., iv, vi, 467, 593, 595.

⁶ Campbell, 34.

⁷ Reports from Public Officers and Institutions Made to the General Assembly of Tennessee, Sessions 1859-1860, 17 and 30-31.

was in the lower South, was not something that Whigs could run away from in Tennessee. As a matter of fact, most legislators had a very personal interest in slavery. Approximately 40% of them were slaveowners during this period⁸, with numbers divided almost equally between the two parties. The Whig challenge for the late 40's and up until the mid-50's was to formulate a rational alternative to the new stir of sectionalism in the Democratic party, symbolized by Harris's resolutions. The "Southern movement" had begun in Tennessee. Whigs had to find an answer to the Democrats to keep from being labelled "submissionists." Compromise and conciliation sufficed as a reply for most of the period from 1848-1854 because Tennessee was, overall, a conservative state, in terms of its support of the "Southern movement." For the most part, men like Harris were still considered radicals.

The 1848 election was fast approaching and most Tennessee Whigs felt they had a sure winner in Zachary Taylor, a Mexican War hero and Louisiana planter. By virtue of his southern background, it was believed, Taylor would ease fears of aggression against slavery emanating from Washington. Taylor was obviously the man for Tennessee in 1848. He defeated the Democratic candidate, Lewis Cass, 64,623-58,504. This 6,000 vote difference represented the largest margin of victory for either party in any presidential or gubernatorial election since

⁸ Kruman, 49.

1840.⁹ Taylor ran particularly strong in East and West Tennessee (57.2% and 55.0% of the vote respectively), the two traditionally Whiggish sections. Taylor gained only 48.5% of the vote in Democratic Middle Tennessee, but this was a 1.5% increase over the Whig tally in the 1847 gubernatorial election.¹⁰

More significant to the state party than the actual election of Taylor was the effect of Taylor's election, which was a major realignment of party leadership. For most of the 1840's Whig leadership in Tennessee had been rather ill-defined. As party lines began to gel in the mid and late 40's it became clear that the Whigs' reliance on anti-Jackson feelings to maintain party loyalty had thrust an ideologically heterogeneous cast into the forefront of the Whig party. The Taylor election brought many of these personal and political differences to the surface.

The problems in the state party seemed to stem largely from confusion over Taylor's political identity. Taylor was not a Whig. He was a war hero nominated to run under the Whig banner. As a result, many local Whigs were unsure and even apprehensive of the course Taylor might take should he be elected. Obviously most Tennessee voters had few qualms about voting for Taylor, but several state leaders did.

John Bell, elected as one of Tennessee's Senators in 1847, was the big winner of the leadership struggle of 1848. As

⁹ Bergeron, Paul. Antebellum Politics in Tennessee. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982. 76.

¹⁰ Ibid. 78.

Taylor's most ardent supporter, he was placed in a strong position, in terms of his career and distribution of party patronage, upon the general's election in November. The big losers appear to have been Ephriam Foster (Nashville resident and former U.S. Senator), James Jones (future U.S. Senator-Memphis), and Boyd McNairy. All of these men were members of what Bell referred to derogatorily as the "Clay and confusion" movement. These three, particularly Foster and Jones, continued their efforts to get Henry Clay nominated as the Whig candidate right up until the national Whig convention in June 1848.

Apparently this support for Clay arose from something other than just loyalty to the old Whig. Bell's election to the Senate in 1847 had sent a shudder through the party. Traditionally, Tennessee's Senate seats had been filled by one candidate from Middle Tennessee and one candidate from East Tennessee, regardless of party. Bell's 1847 election upset this "arrangement" by placing a Middle Tennessean in the East Tennessee seat. Factionalism and sectionalism drew out the election for an inordinate amount of time. Jones and Foster did not really have an alternative candidate; it was personal opposition that caused 48 ballots to be taken before Bell was elected by a majority of 51-49. The swing votes came from Middle Tennesseans, evidently breaking free of the Jones-Foster clique.¹¹

¹¹The full details of the 1847 senatorial election are discussed by Edgar Tricamo in Tennessee Politics 1845-1861, 51-53.

Confusion in the Whig party over the Taylor candidacy is perhaps most evident in the case of William Brownlow, the controversial newspaper editor from East Tennessee. Brownlow had supported Bell in his 1847 bid for the Senate, but in 1848 he also lined up behind Clay. Brownlow never did attack Taylor directly but he did begin attacks on anyone who was "not an out and out Whig" -- a veiled reference to Taylor -- and stated that those who supported Taylor showed a "reckless disregard of all political organizations."¹² Despite their differences over presidential candidates, Brownlow remained a supporter of Bell, at least partly for the latter's commitment to internal improvements, a topic of vital interest to most East Tennesseans.¹³ Whig ideology superceded personal loyalty, and this seems to have held true for nearly all Tennessee Whigs, as evidenced by the way they quickly fell in line behind Taylor once he was nominated in Philadelphia. The 1847-1848 "confusion" was never a questioning of Whig principles. It was a conflict of personalities (i.e. Jones-Foster vs. Bell and Clay vs. Taylor), which had little effect on the average voter. Whigs could point with pride at the results of their legislative and campaign efforts as they prepared for the 1849 gubernatorial election. The state bank, created in 1838, continued to be a valued asset. In 1848, bank capital allowed the Whig-controlled legislature to endorse \$500,000 worth of bonds for the Nashville and Chattanooga

¹² Jonesborough Whig, Jan. 19, May 24, 1848.

¹³ Ibid, Sept. 8, 22, 1847.

Railroad and \$350,000 for the East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad.¹⁴ A Whig president promised to bring the territorial issue to a close in a manner inoffensive, if not favorable, to the South. The Tennessee Whigs were thus prepared for the 1849 election, the first local example in a trend that would continue to increase in the 1850's -- the imposition of national issues in local elections. According to Thornton, the "central event of the fifties is the end of the exclusive association of southern rights disputes with the presidential canvass and their integration into the general politics of the state."¹⁵ The issue of chief concern was, of course, the extension of slavery into the territories. After 1848 "the divisive effect of the slavery question began to make itself deeply felt within the two great bisectonal organizations."¹⁶

The 1849 campaign between the incumbent Whig governor, Neill S. Brown, and the Democratic challenger, William Trousdale, began with a notable decrease in enthusiasm among Whigs. The leadership shakeup of the previous year had left many bitter and alienated. A dejected Ephriam Foster, who had refused to support T aylor, said he saw nothing but "clouds and shadows" in the future of the Whig party.¹⁷ In addition, problems were expected

¹⁴ Bergeron, 66.

¹⁵ Thornton, 242.

¹⁶ Potter, David M. The Impending Crisis 1848-1861, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1976, 228.

¹⁷ Ephriam Foster to John Crittenden, Feb. 18, 1849, Crittenden Papers.

from East Tennessee, which had lost its "designated" Senate seat in the 1847 election. An alternative candidate was expected to come from that section and oppose Brown for the nomination. T.A.R. Nelson, a Knoxville lawyer and vigorous presidential campaign worker, was the man pushed forward. The election of Nelson would help preserve the sectional "balance" of power, which East Tennessee Whigs felt had been lost with Bell's election. Compounding their political concerns was a sincere belief that Governor Brown had not been effective in promoting the building of railroads, especially the East Tennessee and Georgia.¹⁸ Tennessee would not witness a single mile of railroad construction until 1850. Nonetheless, the rivalry for the gubernatorial nomination was rendered a moot point in February of 1849, when Nelson withdrew his name as a matter of "courtesy" to Brown.¹⁹

Sectional and leadership squabbles were not the only source of headaches for the Whigs. The fruits of success in the 1848 election brought their own share of problems -- namely the distribution of party patronage. Meredith P. Gentry, a U.S. Representative from Franklin, was besieged by applicants for federal positions. In one personal letter he conceded his fear that "the appetite for office" was so great that there "[would]

¹⁸ John Miller to Thomas Nelson, Jan. 24, 1849, Nelson Papers, McClung Historical Collection (Knoxville-Knox County Library).

¹⁹ William Sneed to Thomas Nelson, Feb. 9, 1849, Nelson Papers.

not be enough vacancies to satisfy their demand."²⁰ John Bell, the new leader of the state party, unintentionally provoked further intraparty friction by way of his allocation of printing contracts for the Taylor Administration. Brownlow's Jonesborough Whig and the Knoxville Register became fierce rivals for these contracts following the 1848 election.

The 1849 election promised to be an interesting gauge of Tennessee's opinion on the territorial issue. The actions of the Taylor administration had sparked serious concern over the outcome. In April, the president had sent Thomas Butler King to California, in order to assist in the application of statehood. By the eighteenth of that month he was assuring Senator Crittenden of Kentucky that both states (California and New Mexico) "[would] be admitted -- free and Whig!"²¹ The president, according to Michael F. Holt, was attempting to build a "Taylor Republican" party because of his belief that the Whig party was a sure loser running on its old issues. In the political context surrounding the territorial question: "By avoiding explicit use of the Proviso to the Mexican Cession, Taylor offered the substance of free soil in the new states."²²

Tennessee Democrats were eager in their defense of southern rights. The state convention, held in Nashville on April 18,

²⁰Meredith Gentry to William Campbell, Jan. 4, 1849, Campbell Papers (Duke University Library).

²¹Holt, Michael F. The Political Crisis of the 1850's. New York. London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1978. 77.

²²Ibid, 78.

1849, marked the first public endorsement of the state-rights doctrine²³ and, in turn, a vehement condemnation of the Proviso:

...the Government of the United States has no control directly or indirectly, mediately or immediately, over the institution of slavery, so as to impair the rights of the slaveholder, and that in taking such control it transcends the limits of its legitimate functions by destroying the internal organization of the sovereignties who created it.²⁴

The Democrats then unanimously selected William Trousdale, a Mexican War veteran, to run on this distinctly pro-southern platform.

The Whigs thus found themselves in a dilemma when it came time to formulate a platform at their state convention on April 22. They had put a southern Whig into the presidency, but he had chosen to pursue a course antagonistic to most southerners with regard to the territorial issue. Most Tennessee Whigs undoubtedly opposed the Proviso and the actions of Taylor, but an open declaration thereof meant a certain loss in the 1849 elections. The Whig platform, as a result, remained remarkably silent on the territorial issue and the Proviso, as the Democratic Daily Union pointed out:

As the Whig party in the state have held their convention, nominated their candidate for Governor, and adjourned without expressing by resolutions or an address, their sentiments or positions upon any of the questions that interest the country, the sentiments,

²³Cambell, 46.

²⁴The complete Democratic platform can be found in the Nashville Daily Union, April 19, 1849.

opinions and positions of their candidate ...must necessarily be taken as the sentiments, opinions and positions of the party, and for them will the party be held accountable and responsible.²⁵

Throughout the campaign Brown was on the defensive, withstanding accusations that he was a submissionist or even a Free-Soiler. Consequently, many Whigs were pessimistic of Brown's chances.²⁶

How big an issue was the Proviso and slavery expansion to the voters of Tennessee? The returns by no means indicate widespread approval of the Democratic platform. Trousdale won by only 1,493 votes out of a total of 122,171 ballots cast (50.6%). Compared to the 1847 gubernatorial election (with a nearly identical turnout of 122,145), this represented a loss of 1,102 Whig votes and a gain of 1,128 Democratic votes.²⁷ Middle Tennessee was the key behind the Democratic victory. In the county returns reported in the local papers, a drop of almost 2,000 is seen in the Whig tally compared to 1847, while the Democrats actually gained approximately 200 votes.²⁸

Results from the other races do not help in measuring the influence of the injection of the territorial issue into the state canvass. The Democrats did win the lower house of the state assembly 44-41, but the Whigs captured the state senate by

²⁵ Ibid, April 25, 1849.

²⁶ Tricamo, 67.

²⁷ Bergeron, 76 and 78.

²⁸ Campbell, 266-267. Note: 11 of the 41 Middle Tennessee counties are excluded by Campbell.

a margin of 14-11. In district races for the U.S. House of Representatives, Democrats won 7 of the 11 available seats.

Democrats had undoubtedly gained an edge, but it was hardly a decisive victory. The Whigs had failed to turn out voters and had perhaps even lost a handful to the Democrats. This voter apathy and defection, however, should not be attributed directly to the Democratic platform. Personality (i.e. Trousdale as the war hero), economic interests (i.e. dissatisfaction over the failure of Brown's administration to begin railroad construction), sectional interests, and intraparty squabbling could all induce a minor reduction in voter turnout and support. The success of the Whigs in the 1851 election would reemphasize the fact that partisan lines were remaining remarkably firm.

The 1849-1851 period was crucial for both parties. Whichever one could claim credit for resolving the territorial issue, and resolving it in a way "honorable" to the South, could expect favors at the polls from appreciative voters. The most fortunate event of the period for the Whigs was the death of Taylor on July 9, 1850. With Taylor and his reckless territorial policy out of the way, the forces urging compromise and conciliation could step into the limelight. The leaders of the compromise movement were Whigs -- Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and, to some extent John Bell. Clay, on January 29, 1850, had introduced eight resolutions that would later become known as the

"Omnibus" Bill.²⁹ Bell also was a fairly prominent figure in the early negotiations. On February 28 he put forward the "Bell" plan as an alternative to Clay's, which included the unique idea of carving up Texas into as many as four slave states in order to preserve sectional "balance" in Congress.³⁰ Neither plan managed to pass Congress, but by September 17 Stephen Douglas had skillfully maneuvered 6 resolutions through Congress to end the crisis.³¹ The Fillmore Administration proved more than willing in its acceptance of the compromise.

Back in Tennessee, Whigs had maintained their faith in the national party. Perhaps their most explicit test of allegiance was the coming of a southern convention to Nashville in June 1850. The main intent of the convention was to gauge southern

²⁹The contents of Clay's resolutions were as follows: 1) a proposal to admit California as a state on its own terms with regard to slavery 2) the establishment of territorial governments in the rest of the Mexican Cession, "without the adoption of any restriction or condition on the subject of slavery" -- which meant either popular sovereignty, exercised by the territorial legislatures, or the Calhoun doctrine of obligatory constitutional extension, but certainly meant no congressional exclusion -- no Wilmot Proviso (Potter, 99) 3) fixing the boundaries of Texas at the present limits and compensating the state by assuming its public debt 4) abolition of the slave trade, not slavery, in the District 5) affirmation of the immunity of the interstate slave trade from congressional interference 6) a proposed fugitive slave law.

³⁰Congressional Globe. 31 Cong., 1 sess., Appendix, 1089.

³¹Douglas's six measures: 1) Texas would be given 33,333 more square miles than the Omnibus Bill had offered and made this arrangement contingent on the consent of Texas 2) a stricter fugitive slave law 3) admission of California 4) abolishment of the slave trade in the District 5) and 6) establishment of territorial governments in New Mexico and Utah with no provisions regarding slavery.

opinion on the territorial issue and to outline a plan of concerted action should a compromise unacceptable to the South be passed. Tennessee Whigs -- and for that matter, southern Whigs -- shied away from the convention en masse. To many Whigs, the convention was not only a blatant slap in the face of the compromise forces in Washington, but there was also real concern that the assembly could turn into a regional secession convention. The Nashville Daily Gazette -- decidedly Whiggish-- verbalized these fears in May of 1850: "If evil follows from their action, let that party [the Democrats] bear the responsibility. The Whigs have done their duty. They, aided by a number of the other party declared, by their votes inexpedient to take any part in the proposed Convention."^{3 2}

The vote that the Gazette referred to was taken at a Davidson County meeting, where delegates to the convention were elected. The Whigs walked out, leaving the Democrats free to elect delegates of their own choosing. This was a story repeated throughout the state. Most Whigs and a large portion of conservative Democrats refused to even countenance the convention. Of the 101 Tennessee delegates at the first session of the Nashville Convention, only one came from predominantly Whiggish East Tennessee. Seven came from West Tennessee, meaning the remaining ninety-three were Middle Tennesseans. Roughly one-third of these ninety-three came from Davidson County.

The passage of Douglas's measures on September 17 and their

^{3 2}Daily Gazette. May 8, 1850.

general acceptance throughout the South rendered the second session of the convention in November 1850 a dead letter. Whigs remained firmly behind the ideas of compromise and conciliation, as they demonstrated by their votes in Washington. In the House, Whigs voted yea on all the measures of the compromise.³³ In the Senate, Bell voted for the fugitive slave law, the Texas boundary settlement, and the admission of California. He abstained on the two bills calling for the organization of territorial governments because he favored direct statehood instead. The only measure he opposed was the abolition of the slave trade in D.C.

The Democrats, on the other hand, responded in a somewhat confused manner, but, on the whole the native political conservatism of the state prevailed. Tennessee Democrats in the House unanimously supported 4 of the measures³⁴, but split on the admission of California with 4 of the 7 Democrats opposed.³⁵ In the Senate, Hopkins L. Turney (Winchester) rejected every measure but the fugitive slave law.

³³In the House, the Texas boundary bill was combined with the bill to establish a territorial government in New Mexico, forming a "mini Omnibus." Thus only 5 measures were voted on. The Senate voted on all 6 measures separately.

³⁴James H. Thomas (Dem. - Columbia) did not vote on the Utah bill.

³⁵The four Representatives in opposition were: John Savage (Smithville), James H. Thomas (Columbia), Isham Harris (Paris), and F.P. Stanton (Memphis). The three supporters were: Andrew Johnson (Greeneville), George W. Jones (Fayetteville), and Andrew Ewing (Nashville).

The Democrats felt they had a winning national issue in the 1849 gubernatorial election. The Whigs, in effect, turned the tables in 1851 as a result of their handling of the very same issue. Unionism would be used to spur a Whig victory at the polls. There were, of course, issues of local concern -- namely internal improvements and revisions of the state constitution³⁶-- but by far the 1850 Compromise dominated the canvass.

This nearly exclusive emphasis on the Compromise was explicit in both the state party platform and the campaign rhetoric. There was a genuine enthusiasm among the Whigs that this was their year and that almost any man nominated, who stood firmly on their Compromise platform, was a sure winner. This enthusiasm found its most vocal examples in the Whig press. From Stewart County, for example, came the following:

...our political preferences are in favor of G [Gustavas] A Henry, for the Gubernatorial candidate of the whig party: yet, for the purpose of securing harmony and unity in our party, we will sacrifice preferences on the common altar of our country's good-- give our hearty support to the nominee of the Whig convention, let him be who he may.

White County also added its determination to "cordially support who ever may be the nominee of said convention."³⁷

³⁶In the fall of 1849 Governor Trousdale endorsed an amendment to effect the popular election of state judges and attorneys. The General Assembly added its endorsement in February 1850, but because the constitution required that two successive sessions of the legislature had to approve a proposed amendment before it could be presented to voters the issue was still pending as of the 1851 election. See Bergeron, 107.

³⁷Nashville True Whig, Feb. 14, 1851.

The convention convened in Nashville on April 20. Approximately 125 delegates, representing 25 counties, were present. The bulk of the delegates came from Davidson County (25) and neighboring Williamson County (24). This uneven distribution of delegates was not unusual, however. The extreme distances that many delegates had to travel was the first deterrent, especially considering the poor condition of Tennessee's road system. In addition, because the nominee and platform were usually foregone conclusions, it was general practice to either vote by proxy or send no one at all. Party loyalty usually inspired acquiescence with the decisions of the state convention. This phenomenon was commonplace in nearly all states where intense two-party rivalry reinforced partisan loyalty, as Kruman points out.³⁸

At the state convention, William Campbell, another Mexican War hero, was easily nominated on the first ballot. The platform on which he would campaign was focused first and foremost on union sentiment. Heading the list of resolutions was a disclaimer against nullification as unpatriotic and "incompatible with the preservation of the Union." The second resolution endorsed the Compromise as a "final settlement," but warned that failure to support the fugitive slave law in the North would have "deplorable consequences." The local issues that were mentioned secondarily were: aid to internal improvements (an old Whig standby), a "reasonable" protective tariff, improvement of public

³⁸ Kruman, 32-35.

schools, and an endorsement of the constitutional amendments offered in 1849.³⁹

This Whig enthusiasm surrounding the 1850 Compromise was, in fact, so intense that there was even talk of forming a Union party among several Tennessee Whigs in the 1850-1851 period. The first attempt was made by the recently "ousted" Foster-McNairy clique. Whether this group actually believed a Union party was a viable and winning alternative to the Whig party or whether it was a blatant attempt at wresting power away from the new Whig leadership is unclear. Bell, the preeminent "new" leader of the state party, certainly believed the latter motive lay behind the movement. Nonetheless, the idea of a Union party was certainly an intriguing thought for Tennessee Whigs. Union parties had already been established in Mississippi and Georgia.

Bell himself began to tinker with the idea in early 1851, but correspondence with local Whig leaders convinced him of the inadvisability of forming a Union party. Their reservations stemmed from a deep-felt belief that traditional Whig ideology was the only base capable of providing a consistently competitive, if not winning, formula. Whigs were still very different from Democrats. A Union party in Tennessee would include a heavy influx of conservative Democrats, their current political opponents on almost every other issue. Thus the thought of a merger of current enemies was extremely dubious to most Whigs. From Charles Ready (future U.S. Representative from

³⁹Nashville True Whig, April 28, 1851.

the Murfreesboro district). John Bell heard: "Doubtless, it would benefit Democrats more than Whigs...The two may agree in their attachment to the Union of the States...but on most other important questions, they differ now as they always have done."

A letter from T.A.R. Nelson stated:

...you know I have the greatest confidence in the statesmanship and patriotism of Mr. Clay. Yet it strikes me as a little remarkable that he should desire to give our party a new name, when every day's experience is demonstrating the wisdom of his American System -- when the Democrats are asking for distribution -- and when a few events [?] have so wonderfully fulfilled the predictions of his Raleigh letter."⁴⁰

In this context, the 1851 campaign promised to be full of Whig rhetoric concerning the Union. Trousdale was denounced as an ultra-southerner who was not loyal to the legislation of 1850. Additionally, Whigs reminded the voters that the Democrats had been responsible for the Nashville Convention, and accused them

⁴⁰ Charles Ready to John Bell, Jan. 3, 1851. T.A.R. Nelson to John Bell, Jan. 10, 1851. John Bell Papers (Tennessee State Library and Archives).

Clay's Raleigh Letter was a public letter sent to Senator John Crittenden and published in the Whig organ, the Washington National Intelligencer, on April 27, 1844. In the letter, Clay foretold of the dangers of war and the sectional animosities that would result: "I conceive that no motive for the acquisition of foreign territory would be more unfortunate, or pregnant with more fatal consequences, than that of obtaining it [Texas] for the purpose of strengthening one part against another part of the common Confederacy." The annexation of Texas would "sow the seeds of a dissolution of the Union." Clay was thus trying to cross partisan lines and break down sectional prejudice by appealing to union sentiment.

of being for disunion.⁴¹ Campbell played the part of the unionist candidate almost too well. His defense of the Compromise and his personal attacks on South Carolina as an instigator of sectional tensions caused some members of the party to fear this appeal to union sentiment was being taken too far.⁴²

For all their rhetoric, judging from the 1851 returns, the Whigs won over few voters with their unionist line. This is not to say the voters did not believe Whigs were pro-Union. Rather, it should be interpreted as public skepticism about the Whig claim that the Democrats were disunionists. Without question, the bulk of the Democrats were conservative on the topic of southern rights and secession. Few were openly avowing secession. The Whig accusations of disunionism among the Democrats sprang from observations of growing talk about the right to secede. Even on this topic, numerous Democrats had serious qualms, as the Nashville (Democratic) Union was quick to point out: "Not one of the Democrats in Tennessee's congressional delegation believes in the Constitutional right of a state to secede even as an abstraction."⁴³

Campbell defeated Trousdale by a count of 63,333-62,293, which represented the highest vote total in the history of the

⁴¹Tricamo, 86.

⁴²Felix Zollicoffer to William Campbell, June 10, 1851, Campbell Papers. Zollicoffer was a Whig from Maury County, serving as a state senator in 1851. Zollicoffer advised Campbell to tone down his unionist enthusiasm because it might bring possible Democratic charges of pandering to the North.

⁴³Nashville Union, August 21, 1851.

state. Both parties gained a significant number of voters as compared to the 1849 election. The most "dramatic" shifts in vote distribution were seen in Middle Tennessee, where, although they lost the section, Whigs gained ground on the Democrats.⁴⁴ Another remarkable item was the continuation of a Democratic trend in West Tennessee. As West Tennessee edged toward a more definite plantation system and as Memphis grew in importance as a major commercial center for the cotton market, the region became markedly more pro-southern than the rest of the state. However, it should be remembered that this spread of "extremism" is a relative comparison to the rest of the state. It by no means included a pro-South position as expansive as in the states of the lower South.

The significance of the 1851 election can not be found in the numbers. This was hardly a landslide victory for the Whigs, who secured only 50.4% of the total vote. How helpful, then, was the injection of union sentiment into the campaign? It was probably rather limited in its usefulness because the average voter did not perceive the Democrats as the party of disunion. When it came to issues of unionism most Tennessee Democrats and Whigs were still nearly identical in sentiment. The vast majority of Democrats and Whigs alike were "conservative to the core -- firmly resolved to maintain at once the rights of the

⁴⁴According to Campbell's numbers, Whigs gained approximately 1,600 votes while the Democrats lost about 1,000. Note this does not include returns from 11 of Middle Tennessee's 41 counties. PP. 265-271.

South. against all assaults from whatever quarter -- standing immovably upon the Republican basis of conservative, Constitutional rights."⁴⁵ The Compromise and union sentiment were important considerations in the minds of Tennessee voters, but it seems the Whigs overestimated their differences with the Democrats on these issues or, perhaps, underestimated the importance of other issues.

In addition to Cambell's victory, the Whigs gained a 16-9 majority in the state senate and a 39-36 edge in the lower house. However, in the contests for the U.S. House, the Democrats maintained their 7-4 majority. Interestingly enough, of the four Democrats who had shown some hostility to the Compromise legislation, only one -- James H. Thomas -- did not return. His replacement was a Columbia native with a familiar last name-- William H. Polk, brother of the former president.

The success of the Whigs in the elections for state offices was probably due more to traditional Whig economic ideology than the stress on unionism. Railroad fever, in particular, was running rampant throughout the state. Construction had just begun on the East Tennessee and Virginia and the Nashville and Chattanooga in March 1851. Whigs were usually in the front of sponsoring this new construction and demonstrated their eagerness through votes in the state legislature. The downside to this push for railroads was the fact that all three sections actively sought further state aid for funding rail construction. Thus the

⁴⁵Nashville True Whig, August 21, 1851.

pre-existing sectional animosity was only heightened by the competition for government money. When Tennessee finally completed its rail system in the spring of 1861, the lines accentuated the three sections. They chiefly ran north-south and connected the individual sections with areas outside the state. Campbell notes that "The lack of an integrated state system of railroads did nothing to lessen the sectional animosities already existing within the state itself or to promote a feeling of unity."⁴⁶

Sectional struggles continued within the leading ranks of the Whig party as well. In control of both houses of the General Assembly, the party greedily eyed the upcoming vacancy in the U.S. Senate. H.L. Turney (Dem.) was on his way out in 1851, which meant the Whigs were in a position to place two party members in the Senate (Bell had been elected in 1847). However, when it came time for nominations it was clear the process would not be easy. Three candidates -- one from each section -- vied for the nomination: T.A.R. Nelson (East), James C. Jones (West), and Gustavas Henry (Middle). East Tennesseans were still embittered about Bell's victory in 1847 and lined up staunchly behind Nelson. Henry dropped out of the picture early because there was already one Middle Tennessean in the Senate. After 25 ballots Jones received the nomination when 4 East Tennessee Whigs defected from Nelson. The frustration and disappointment of East Tennessee would become evident during the 1852 presidential

⁴⁶ Campbell. 31.

campaign.

In regard to local legislation enacted during the 1851-1853 period, perhaps the most significant action of the Whig-controlled General Assembly was an agreement to provide loans to certain specified railroads in the form of 6 percent bonds at the rate of \$8,000 per mile for the purchase of rails and equipment necessary to the actual laying of the rails.⁴⁷ Also significant was the mandatory redrawing of Tennessee's congressional districts. The number of districts was being cut from 11 to 10, and it would be up to the Whigs to decide where the new district lines would run. Gustavas A. Henry took most of the initiative for the Whigs and reshaped the districts so that Andrew Johnson's district was the one most significantly affected. During Johnson's 1853 gubernatorial campaign against Henry, Johnson's supporters continually made reference to the fact that their candidate had been "Henrymandered."

The state bank, created in 1838 by the Whigs, continued to be a political firestarter between the two parties. However, toward the early to mid-50's Democrats began toning down their attacks on the bank. They were learning how to live with it, and even support it. This was one symptom in a larger process. Democrats were beginning to blur party lines on economic issues as they began to accept some of the fundamentals of Whig ideology. The "charms" of a market economy gradually began to

⁴⁷Bergeron, 108.

erode inbred Jacksonian resistance.⁴⁸ As a result, it was becoming increasingly difficult to discern party lines on economic issues, demonstrated by voting records on concerns like the state bank and railroads.

The 1852 presidential campaign in some ways symbolized the fading of Jacksonian economic philosophy. The Democrats brought forth Franklin Pierce, an active participant in the "Young America" movement of the 1850's. The first priority of "Young America" was an aggressive foreign policy which would allow for free trade and trade expansion. The movement symbolized "sympathy for the liberals of Europe, the expansion of the American republic southward and westward, and the grasping of the ...Pacific..."⁴⁹ Pierce -- in both his platform and presidential programs -- pandered to the "Young Americans" and, in particular, to their southern brethren. He stressed a vigorous foreign policy through commercial and territorial expansion. The 1850 Compromise was accepted as a final settlement, and he agreed not to agitate the slavery issue. An additional allurements to southerners was the endorsement of the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions.

Pierce's opponent in the 1852 election was Winfield Scott. Selling Scott to Tennessee Whigs, especially East Tennessee

⁴⁸ Kruman, 75.

⁴⁹ Edmund Burk to Franklin Pierce, June 14, 1852. Found in Jere W. Robinson's article "The Memphis Convention of 1853: Southern Dreams and 'Young America'." Tennessee Historical Quarterly, Vol. 33, no. 3, (Fall 1974).

Whigs. was a difficult process. To begin with, Scott's failure to declare unconditional support for the 1850 Compromise caused considerable confusion within the state party, which had just swept the state elections on that very issue. Compounding this concern over Scott was the disgruntlement of East Tennessee Whigs, who once again felt they were being slighted. Millard Fillmore had been their nominee of choice at the state nominating convention in early 1852, but they were run over roughshod by the bulk of the party, anticipating certain victory with another war hero. As a result, fissures began appearing in party loyalty.

William Brownlow, Meredith P. Gentry (U.S. Representative from Williamson County), and Christopher H. Williams (U.S. Representative from Henderson County) made public knowledge of their refusal to support Scott. And many who did agree to support Scott did so with little enthusiasm. Even Bell confessed he had "no heart in the business" of campaigning for Scott.⁵⁰ Dissension was becoming commonplace in the party. Democrats were taking over Whig mainstays -- namely the economic philosophy that the Whig party was founded upon -- and thus blurring party lines. Without question, the added dissension caused by sectional (i.e. the senatorial elections of 1847 and 1851) and personal antagonisms (i.e. Bell vs. the McNairy-Foster-Jones clique) was not beneficial at a time when Whigs needed to reassert a political identity. According to Bell, it was a bleak time for

⁵⁰Bell to William B. Campbell, Sept. 3, 1852, David Campbell Papers.

the party: "I think I see signs of a more decisive breaking up of our party in Tennessee in the next election than I have seen at any time heretofore."⁵¹ Bell's statement was prophetic. The 1853 gubernatorial campaign would be the last election to include the Whig banner.

Fortunately for the Whigs, the apathy surrounding the 1852 election was not a phenomenon exclusive to them. Voter participation dropped by over 10,000 votes, compared to the 1851 election. The Whigs did manage to muster enough loyalists to carry the state for Scott 58,586-56,900. The most dramatic drop-off in Whig voter participation was, not surprisingly, in East Tennessee. Of the county vote totals recorded by Campbell, a decrease of over 3,000 (approximately 16%) in the Whig vote is seen between the 1852 election (20,165-16,877). The Democrats, meanwhile, lost only 1,200 votes (14,981-13,781), or about 8% of their 1848 vote total in East Tennessee. It is interesting to note that this "dismal" showing for the Whigs in East Tennessee came upon the heels of a gubernatorial election which turned out record numbers of Whig supporters in that section.

Were local Whigs losing interest in the national party? This is doubtful because, if nothing else, the national party was a huge patronage machine, and hence its continued survival was vital to the future of the state machine. Perhaps more accurately, the 1852 election reemphasized the growing confusion and uncertainty of Whig ideology on national issues as they

⁵¹Ibid. Feb. 5. 1853.

concerned Tennesseans. The nature of the state party helped insure bipartisan conflict. Local elites, regional, class, and ethnic differences all helped to enliven bipartisan conflict on the local level. On the other hand, what passed in Washington was an abstraction. Local leaders did not "live" the national Whig experience. It was something distant which they could only hear or read about. And, unfortunately, when the territorial issue was reopened, local Whigs found the position of the national party difficult to defend. Democrats were more on the "right side" of public opinion than the Whigs.

The 1853 gubernatorial race, to the benefit of Whigs, was nearly void of any discussion of the territorial issue. Instead, the emphasis was placed on personalities and local concerns. Andrew Johnson, the ever controversial East Tennessee Democrat, would be the Whigs' target in the 1853 campaign, and there were plenty of angles to attack him from. Johnson was pictured as the spokesman for the "common man" by the Democrats. One of the main planks in his personalized platform was a proposed abolition of the three-fifths clause in determining congressional representation. Though Johnson actually defended slavery, many Whigs branded him an abolitionist. In addition to constitutional reform, Johnson urged the passage of a local homestead bill, popular election of U.S. Senators, and limited terms for the Supreme Court justices. Johnson's "common man" image surrounded all these planks. His platform, in the Thomas Abernathy's words, was "a definite program of practical reform

and it was a program peculiarly his own."⁵²

Internal dissension continued to plague the Whigs and showed signs of worsening. Unlike the 1851 campaign, when most organs of the party press agreed to support whomever the "choice of the party" was, 1853 was marked by public bickering. Brownlow's Whig in its April 2 issue said, "If the Whig candidate suits us, we will support him; if not, we are hands off."⁵³

There were still bitter feelings throughout the state, particularly in East Tennessee, over the "forced" nomination of Scott in 1852 and the wrangling that took place during the senatorial elections of 1847 and 1851. Divisiveness was also encouraged by competition for railroad money and controversial issues like the burgeoning temperance movement.⁵⁴ The Banner published an appeal entitled "Harmony Among Whigs," which pleaded: "Some, who opposed Gen. Scott, seem inclined to keep up the war upon his supporters...Let us cease these fruitless disputes over buried issues. The principles we espouse

⁵²Abernathy, Thomas P. From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932, 316-317.

⁵³Knoxville Whig, April 2, 1853.

⁵⁴The Republican Banner and Nashville Whig stated: "...In doing so [making legislature candidates run on the temperance issue], we make this reform a political and party question, and seriously endanger its success; for whilst the whigs who favor the law, will throw off all allegiance to party, the opposition will adhere closely to the practice of disregarding side issues, and drawing to themselves all the strength we lose..." March 19, 1853. The Democrats, being the party of choice for the foreign vote, were overwhelmingly opposed to a temperance law.

eloquently appeal to us."⁵⁵

The Whig convention met in Nashville on April 25. Delegates from a reported 33 counties were present. The tone of the platform reflected the pessimism surrounding the campaign. The wordy platform of 1851 was replaced by a much more condensed one consisting of three basic components: 1) endorsement of the Whig Address made at the 1851 convention; 2) "[hearty] approval of the Domestic and Foreign Policy of the National Administration of Millard Fillmore" and; 3) the nomination of Gustavus A. Henry.⁵⁶

The campaign itself was largely one of personalities, as Whigs attacked Johnson as an abolitionist and Democrats returned the favor by labelling Henry a "federalist of the deepest type."⁵⁷ The only local issue that received any significant attention from the Whigs was the old reliable cry for internal improvements and state aid.

Johnson prevailed in the election by a total of 63,414, over Henry's 61,071. Voter turnout rebounded to the 1851 level, but whereas Democrats exceeded their 1851 total, Whigs scored 2,000 fewer votes than their 1851 level. East Tennessee effectively broke the back of the Whigs in 1853. In the 1851 and 1852 elections Democrats had only been able to win 44.8% of the East Tennessee vote. In 1853 this figure jumped suddenly to 49.3%.

⁵⁵ Ibid. March 23. 1853.

⁵⁶ Ibid. April 26. 1853.

⁵⁷ Tricamo. 119.

The fact that Johnson was an East Tennessean probably accounted for a large portion of this vote swing, which reemphasizes the importance of sectionalism in Tennessee politics. Campbell's totals from East Tennessee show a remarkable change. The Whigs lost 1,663 votes from the 1851 election, while Democrats gained a nearly identical 1,721 votes. This is not to say every dissenting Whig voted Democrat. Undoubtedly some demonstrated their dissatisfaction by not voting at all. Brownlow can be included among the latter. Apparently he did not find Henry an "acceptable" candidate, as the Whig failed to take any stand at all during the gubernatorial election.

In the other races of 1853, Democrats were able to recapture the state senate with a 13-12 margin, but the Whigs increased their majority in the lower house to 44-31. Whigs were also able to recapture control of the congressional delegation with a 6-4 victory. The continuing vitality of the party on the district level belied the apparent decline of the state party itself. In the gubernatorial elections Democrats dominated Middle Tennessee and were gaining ground in the west. Why then were Whigs still winning consistently on the district level? Was personality more important than party? A study of turnover rate would help clarify the answer (see Appendix), but there are plenty of examples that indicate personality figured strongly in the mind of the average voter. For instance, Democrat F.P. Stanton, U.S. Representative from Memphis, was a consistent winner in three straight elections from 1849-1853. However no Democratic

gubernatorial or presidential candidate was ever able to carry Shelby County until 1857. Could one prominent individual determine the party allegiance of a county single-handedly? Andrew Johnson demonstrated that this was a distinct possibility. Johnson was able to easily win his races for the House as a Democrat in predominantly Whiggish East Tennessee. The redistricting of 1851 was undertaken by Whigs, at least partly, to get Johnson out of Congress. It is also interesting to note that while Johnson's home county of Greene went consistently Democratic, neighboring Cocke and Jefferson Counties were dominated by Whigs, sometimes going to that party by a margin of 4 or 5 to 1.

Johnson would have his problems with the Whig-controlled General Assembly. The lower house prevented passage of his Homestead Bill and his proposal for constitutional amendments was allowed to die in the senate's committee on Federal Relations.⁵⁸ One important piece of legislation that was passed was a new tax for the purpose of providing public schools, the first measure of its kind in Tennessee history. This new tax enjoyed nearly wholesale Whig support since, after all, improvement of public schools had been part of their "enthusiastic" 1851 platform.

Tennessee Whigs had their own problems though. Despite holding a majority in the legislature, fierce factional fighting erupted again over senatorial elections. Nelson was again

⁵⁸ White, Leonard. *The Jacksonians, A Study in Administrative History 1829-1861*. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1954. 585-87.

brought forward to challenge Bell in his re-election bid. Nelson's supporters were in fact so adamant that they refused to go into a party caucus for the purpose of selecting a nominee who would command all Whig votes. Bell was finally elected after 49 ballots on October 29. His victory was achieved when 10 West Tennessee Democrats broke ranks and voted for Bell.

Bell's appearance at the Memphis Commercial Convention in June of that year might have been the key move in his drive for votes. While there Bell made a vague motivational speech that included a recommendation for a Pacific railroad with a terminus at Memphis. Whether this was a purely political move on Bell's part is questionable. He had traditionally been an ardent supporter of internal improvements. Undoubtedly though, this appearance could only boost his image in the eyes of potential "crossover" Democrats. Brownlow, in fact, attributed Bell's 1853 victory directly to this source: "...first to last, the Western District Democrats have been for Bell...They have but one idea and that is the Pacific Railroad and its terminus at Memphis-- and Bell is their man for the scheme."⁵⁹

Whig cohesion, as well as Whig distinction, were becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. Sectional and personal animosities were taking an uncertain toll on the party. In regard to the territorial issue, they stood on very uncertain ground. Renewed agitation was exactly what they dreaded after

⁵⁹William Brownlow to Oliver P. Temple, Oct. 26, 1853, Oliver P. Temple Papers (University of Tennessee Library).

their close call in 1850. The hinges were closer to coming off than probably most Whigs anticipated. In January of 1854 Stephen Douglas took the fatal step for the Whig party when he introduced the Kansas-Nebraska Bill in Congress. What started out as the first stage towards promoting a transcontinental railroad, turned into a powder keg that would destroy the uneasy peace of 1850. The Whig name, if not Whiggish notions, would disappear in Tennessee. Its disoriented members would turn to the American label in hopes of establishing a new national party. The 1854-1857 period would be a critical time of transition, but not necessarily one of perpetual defeat. The Tennessee Whigs were loyal enough to their ideological, conservative base, and hostile enough to the Democrats, to give that party more than a run for its money through the mid-50's.

Percentage of Democratic Vote by Section*

Section	1847	1848	1849	1851	1852	1853
East	46.3	42.8	46.2	44.8	44.8	49.3
Middle	53.0	51.5	55.0	53.2	52.6	53.1
West	47.0	45.0	47.3	48.3	47.6	48.8
TOTAL	49.7	47.5	50.6	49.6	49.3	50.9

Total Votes

Party	1847	1848	1849	1851	1852	1853
Whig	61,441	64,623	60,339	63,333	58,586	61,071
Democratic	60,704	58,504	61,832	62,293	56,900	63,414
TOTAL	122,145	123,127	122,171	125,626	115,486	124,485

Voter Participation %

1847	1848	1849	1851	1852	1853
85-88	83-86	81-84	80-83	73-75	76-79

*All numbers come from Bergeron pp. 76, 78, 118, 122, 135.

Chapter 2: Transition and Party Reconstruction

The 1854-1857 period was by no means a moment of truth for Tennessee Whigs, as it was for Whigs in many of the other southern states. The Kansas-Nebraska Act staggered the state party but it did not bring about an end to organized anti-Democratic sentiment. Whereas in several states of the region Whigs began to retreat in droves behind the ramparts of the "Southern movement" and thus mix more closely with the more sectional Democrats, in Tennessee a distinct two-party system remained firmly in place. However, the political scene had entered a new phase with the arrival of the American party. The balance of power in the new party remained in Middle Tennessee but it would be leaders from the eastern section that directed the party, marking a retrieval of the power lost during the 1847-1854 period. It would be a time for transition and a time for reassertion under a new name, but a familiar formula--conservatism and conciliation.

By recapitulating the last days of the old state party it becomes easier to see exactly how the way was cleared for the Americans. The controversy surrounding the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the fractures that resulted in the state party were not so much a bitter denouement as they were piling for a new foundation. It had already become evident by late 1853 that a restructuring of the party was taking place and that this internal reorganization would affect even the uppermost levels of the anti-Democratic leadership. The drawn out battle over Bell's

re-election to the U.S. Senate -- the re-election of the supposedly preeminent leader of the state party -- was indicative of the serious internal troubles brewing. Despite controlling the General Assembly, it took the Whigs nearly 50 ballots to elect Bell, which served as a reminder of the Whigs most lasting, deficient quality.

Firm, centralized leadership was an elusive goal for Tennessee Whigs which they were never able to realize. True, the Democrats had their "outsiders" (e.g., Andrew Johnson and Isham Harris), but they also had a very stable and -- more importantly in terms of votes -- populous core to build around in Middle Tennessee where the likes of Andrew Ewing and A.V. Brown helped keep the section firmly in the Democratic column. In West Tennessee the Democrats were garnering significant support that seemed to be growing by a process of inertia. East Tennessee for the most part was a lost cause, but if a Democratic candidate could make a strong showing there -- like Johnson in '53 -- then all the better. Still, state elections could be won handily without East Tennessee.

In contrast, the Whigs seemed to encounter dissension on all sides. East Tennessee, though still in the Whig camp, gave its support only grudgingly after the heated senatorial contests of '47 and '53 and the intervening presidential elections. John Bell had secured enough political foes in Middle Tennessee to insure that that section would lack focused Whig leadership. Clearly what was holding the Whig party together was not an

unflinching loyalty to the Whig name or leading personalities, but, rather, a near hatred for the Democrats and the party line they espoused.

As during earlier internal bickering, Whigs made no secret of their familial squabbles following the election of Johnson in 1853. The party press played out the drama for all to read. The Memphis Whig, for instance, had openly rebelled against the nomination of Bell for re-election to the Senate in 1853. The Whig pushed forth the recently defeated Gustavas Henry as its candidate, but the reasons for doing so were unclear. The Nashville Banner accused the Whig of dissenting with its choice (Bell) not because of a real desire to promote Henry but out of a "deep personal maleovance towards Mr. Bell." The Banner went on to say: "...with the Memphis Whig the interests of the party do not constitute the controlling consideration which activates its conduct."¹

An uneasy peace prevailed following the election of Bell in November 1853, but it was obvious to most Whigs that both the state and national party were largely surviving on borrowed time. In effect the knockout blow came in the late winter and early spring of 1854 with the presentation of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill before Congress. The bullet that Tennessee Whigs had dodged in 1850 returned again as they were once more forced to position themselves on the slavery extension issue. How were the Whigs to react and how were they to do so in a unified manner distinct

¹Republican Banner and Nashville Whig, Sept. 30, 1853.

from the southern Democratic line?

Edward Tricamo points out the dilemma that Tennessee Whigs faced: "In the South during the 1850's one's stand on either side of a controversial issue had to be that it was the best means for the protection of slavery, which in turn was identified with southern rights."¹ Thus the Whigs had to formulate a rationale that justified opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Bill as the best defense for the South's peculiar institution. Their failure to do this as a united party signalled the last gasps of the Whigs. It was not even necessary to wait for the final vote in Washington to reveal the fissures in the party. The debates preceding the roll call provided convincing proof that the Tennessee Whigs-- and southern Whigs in general -- were in disarray.

Senator James Jones from Memphis was perhaps the most vocal Whig supporter of the bill in Tennessee's delegation. To him, popular sovereignty was a decidedly pro-South approach to the slavery extension issue. He expressed himself as amazed but pleased with the thought of repealing the 1820 legislation that established the 36 30' line.² In addition, Jones implied that those who remained steadfastly behind the compromise line as the best possible solution were out of touch with contemporary realities: "...the doctrine contained in the act of 1820 directly invades and positively infringes upon the rights and sovereignty

¹Tricamo, 134.

²Mrs. Archibald Dixon, *The True History of the Missouri Compromise Line and Its Repeal*, Cincinnati, 1899, 443.

of the States...I must vote for myself, and not for the dead.³

John Bell, Jones's partner in the Senate, might well have been one of the targets that this comment was levelled toward. The story of Bell's role in the Kansas-Nebraska legislation, like his role in the 1850 Compromise, depicts a loyal Whig desperately trying to save the party but without a coherent plan for doing so. Bell was, in fact, a member of the Senate Committee on Territories that initially reviewed the Kansas-Nebraska Bill.⁴ However, Bell was absent from Washington when the bill first entered committee -- apparently because of his senatorial campaign and other concerns back home -- and returned only shortly before the committee was to vote on whether or not to recommend the bill to the Senate.

Bell claimed he was only able to give the bill a cursory reading before granting his consent to the proposed change in the report (the 36 30' repeal) and this he did "with the express reservation of the privilege of opposing passage of the bill" should a more careful examination bid him to do so.⁵ How much of this was political rhetoric and how much was actual truth is, of course, impossible to distinguish. However, what is clear is that Bell failed, for whatever reason, to take a decisive stance

³Congressional Globe, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., 340-43 (Feb. 7, 1854).

⁴Other members of the committee were: Chairman Stephen Douglas (Illinois), Sam Houston (Texas), Robert W. Johnson (Arkansas), George W. Jones (Iowa), and Edward Everett (Mass.).

⁵Congressional Globe, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 408-415 (March 3, 1854).

on the bill until it had evolved into a full-blown sectional conflict in the congress. Did Bell deliberately skirt the issue or is it possible that he could not see the potential explosiveness of the bill?

Edward Everett, one of Bell's colleagues on the committee, made a case for the former assertion when he noted: "...had they [Bell and Houston] done so [opposed the bill] in committee, it would not have passed, but Bell took care to absent to his mines, and Houston (so Douglas told me) neglected to attend."¹ Bell himself later admitted to a personal crisis of indecision and regretted that he did not attack the bill in its infancy. This early timidity seemed to stem from a reluctance to separate from other southern Whigs who refused to remain in the party ranks. Bell became increasingly bitter toward these same Whigs who united with the southern Democrats and began to suspect an "ingeniously arranged plan" by these defectors to destroy him.²

Exactly how was Bell able to justify his opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Bill as the best means for protecting slavery? Bell's logic on the issue of slavery extension was never clear but what it amounted to was a rigid belief that only state governments -- not territorial governments or the Congress -- had the right to pass legislation on the issue. Therefore, Bell denounced the bill as indefensible in both principle and practice

¹ Paul R. Frothingham, Edward Everett: Orator and Statesman, New York, 1925, 353.

² Bell to William Campbell, Aug. 10, 1854, Campbell Papers.

and contended that the question of extension should only be decided during the adoption of a state's constitution.³

The dissension among the Tennessee Whigs in Washington was reflected in the party press back home. The Banner, traditionally a supporter of Bell, assaulted the Kansas-Nebraska Bill -- especially the bill's principle of popular sovereignty-- insisting slavery was not protected by the provisions of the bill and that slavery would indeed be threatened by it.⁴ The Banner went on to call the bill "humbug" and declare that if the principle of squatter sovereignty was established no new or present territories would ever become slave states despite being "the common treasure or the common blood of all the states."⁵

The Knoxville Whig, like the Banner, supported Bell in his opposition to the bill and even went as far as to recommend him for the presidency in 1856. The Nashville True Whig, on the other hand, supported the bill and thus sided with Jones.

As a result of this Whig dissension, Tennessee Democrats espied a golden opportunity to further the breaches among their political foes and decimate Whig unity. Surprisingly, it was a Tennessee Whig who helped them do just that. On February 27, 1854, H.R. Lucas, a Whig representing the Benton and Humphreys district in the lower house, presented a resolution expressing

³Congressional Globe, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 408-415 (March 3, 1854).

⁴Republican Banner and Nashville Whig, Jan. 14, March 4, 7, 23, and June 10, 1854.

⁵Ibid, March 9, 1854.

approval of the course pursued by Jones in support of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. A Democrat, E.J. Lamb, from West Tennessee, quickly offered a substitute resolution declaring the bill "equitable, and in conformity to the federal constitution, to the treaty by which said territory was acquired, and to the compromise of 1850."⁶

Both resolutions were defeated in the lower house on March 4, but Joel J. Jones, a Democrat representing Bedford and Marshall Counties, offered a resolution similar to Lamb's in the state senate. The bill passed the senate by a 20-1 vote and was favored by a three to one margin in the lower house. However, the House was unable to assemble the fifty representatives needed for a quorum. Thus the resolution was declared defeated by the Speaker. According to Joseph H. Parks, the inability to draw a quorum was the result of Bell supporters conveniently absenting themselves from the chamber and, in turn, sparing Bell a major political embarrassment.⁷

In Washington, once the Kansas-Nebraska Bill was placed in front of the House for a vote on May 22, it passed 113-100. Three days later the Senate followed suit with a 35-12 vote. Five out of the eight Whigs in Tennessee's delegation opposed the

⁶ Tennessee House Journal, 1853-54, pp. 979, 1094-95.

⁷ Joseph H. Parks, "The Tennessee Whigs and the Kansas-Nebraska Bill," Journal of Southern History. Vol. 10 (1944), 318.

bill.⁸ The three who supported it were Jones, Felix Zollicoffer (Nashville), and Charles Ready (Murfreesboro).

Though three dissenting Whig votes may not seem a sure sign of party dissolution, let it be recalled that less than four years earlier Tennessee Whigs had moved with unanimity on the 1850 compromise, either supporting all 6 of the measures or at least abstaining on those aspects of the Compromise they deemed questionable. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill left no doubt that a fence had been erected amid the state party with members unable to scramble upon anything that resembled a common ground. The Whig party, as it had been known for almost twenty years was dead, but most of the bonds that formed the Whig party remained intact. Undoubtedly a handful of Whigs viewed the Kansas-Nebraska controversy as the last straw and defected to the Democratic party or dropped out of the political scene altogether. However the vast majority remained politically active and bitter foes of the Democrats. A period of transition and reassertion was in the offing. the aftershocks of Kansas-Nebraska would be felt in Tennessee as late as the 1857 senatorial election, when Bell would be reminded of his opposition and asked to resign by a Democratic-controlled general Assembly. Bell was not the only Whig to carry the lodestone of Kansas-Nebraska. All five of the Whigs who had opposed the bill in Congress would eventually be replaced by Democrats. Parks

⁸The five Whigs opposed were: Bell, Nathaniel Taylor (Happy Valley), William Cullom (Carthage), Robert M. Bugg (Lynnville), and Emerson Etheredge (Dresden).

asserts that this " suggests that it was the disappearance of the Whig party as a factor in Tennessee politics rather than individual positions on the bill that caused their retirement."⁹

Parks is only half right. It is improbable that solely because of their position on the bill they were voted out of office. A more credible explanation is that the Democrats found it much easier to rally their supporters than the disintegrating Whig party. Despite this disorganization the Whig party did not disappear as a "factor." On the contrary, the anti-Democratic vote was very much alive. It only sought a new organization into which it could channel its energies. The forthcoming American party provided such an outlet. Frank Lowrey bears this contention out in his study of Tennessee voting behavior. His research showed 91 percent of the members of the new American party who could be traced back to an earlier time had been Whigs.¹⁰

What was the basis of this new party and how did it differ from or emulate traditional Whig principles? The most vital plank in the party platform was the belief that "Americans should rule America." Leaders of the party contended that foreigners could not sympathize with American interests and were thus a potential danger when placed in office. Closely tied to this

⁹ Parks, 329.

¹⁰ Frank M. Lowrey, III, "Tennessee Voters during the Second Two-Party System, 1836-1860: A Study in Voter Constancy and in Socio-Economic and Demographic Distinctions" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Alabama, 1973), 24-27. Cited in Bergeron, 157.

anti-foreignism was an anti-Catholic stance, though the Americans explicitly denied any attempt to link Church and State. Frederick Anspach, in defense of the party claimed that, in fact, it was Protestants who were being persecuted. The banishment of the bible from public schools was cited as only one instance of the "frequent assaults upon Protestantism." In Anspach's eyes the American party was only a measured response to maintain and protect the rights of Protestants, which, not accidentally, encompassed most of "native" America.¹¹

What the American party did not address was the question of slavery extension. Instead it abhorred any such agitation on the issue. conciliation was thus an implied component of party orthodoxy and, in turn, an attractive component to most of Tennessee's former Whigs. A future description of local party leaders by the new American Banner in fact sounded remarkably similar to Whig rhetoric of the early 1850's. Local leaders were praised as individuals "around whom may consistently rally all sound, conservative men, North and South, who have at heart the deliverance of the country from the evils and dangers of sectional agitation, and the promotion of harmony and of the Union."¹² Words like these would serve as effective bait for any coalition seeking to allure and reassemble the Whiggish element of Tennessee politics.

¹¹ Frederick Anspach, The Sons of the Sires; A History of the Rise, Progress, and Destiny of the American Party, (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, and Co., 1855), 29.

¹² American Banner, March 22, 1856.

The movement of Whigs into the American party is difficult to trace largely because of the secrecy that surrounded Know-Nothing enclaves. It appears that by the late summer/early fall of 1854 the infrastructure of the American party was already forming within the state. A peculiar municipal election in Nashville is oftentimes reported as the first formal showing of the party as a contestant against the Democrats. In August of 1854 the Democratic candidate for mayor ran unopposed until the morning of the election. Then, suddenly, an alternative candidate, W.B. Shepard, was announced and won by 922 votes. No party affiliation was declared, but it was widely believed Shepard was a Know-Nothing.

The rather substantial margin of victory seems to indicate that Shepard's supporters were not just former Whigs. The Nashville True Whig observed that large numbers of both Whigs and Democrats had voted for Shepard.¹³ If this is true, then it signifies what was believed to be one of the central aims of the American party -- luring conservative Democrats, as well as former Whigs, into their folds. The Americans were eager to prove that they were more than just the Whig party under a new name. As a result, the formative months of the party's existence were geared towards constructing a legitimately independent identity with a broad conservative appeal. An alternative target to Democrats' growing sectional rhetoric was developed in the form of a thorough attack on foreigners and, more specifically,

¹³Nashville True Whig, Sept. 1, 1854.

non-Protestants. For all their bluster, it appears that the American party was unable to gain many "crossover Democrats." Lowrey's trace of almost 800 Democrats throughout the 1836-1860 period found that only seven percent of those included ever changed to an anti-Democratic party.¹⁴

If Lowrey's conclusions are correct, then the Tennessee American party was, generally speaking, little more than the Whig party under an assumed name. Tricamo reiterates this point: "...the Know-Nothings in Tennessee were not so much a group of religious bigots as a party into which the Whigs might go when their own party disappeared."¹⁵ Democrats undoubtedly recognized most of their political foes in the new party and were thus highly suspicious of any beckonings to join. The significance of the American party then is not the establishment of a truly "new" party but its rearrangement of the Whig hierarchy. Middle Tennessee would retain its hegemony, but a much more vocal and affluent eastern section would also prevail.

William Brownlow, editor of the Knoxville Whig, was unquestionably one of the foremost spokesmen for the Know-Nothings from the east. However Brownlow seems to have been more a "spiritual" leader than a political one, emphasizing the party's formal nativist doctrine over its unwritten anti-Democratic purposes. According to Gohmann, "More than anyone else, he [Brownlow] kept the religious and foreign element in the

¹⁴ Bergeron, 156.

¹⁵ Tricamo, 131.

limelight whereas politicians were more inclined to question the territorial legislation of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill."¹⁶ It was Brownlow's newspaper that served as the most radical voice of the party for the duration of its existence in the state.

Brownlow, an adamant Whig, did not formally renounce all ties with the old Whig party until the spring of 1855 when he wrote: "For ourselves...we acknowledge no allegiance to any other party than the new party, the American Party."¹⁷ However Brownlow's sentiments were clear long before this statement. The praises of the Know-Nothings were being sung months earlier. The October 7, 1854, edition of the Whig cited the Know-Nothings' appeal "to the citizens love of liberty; to the religious man's dislike of an overbearing and grasping priesthood, and to the independent man's desire to escape from the domination of party."¹⁸

Without question Brownlow was the most prominent figure in the state when it came to Know-Nothing propaganda. One vivid example of his vehemence was the publishing of a book with the wordy title Americanism Contrasted with Foreignism, Romanism and bogus Democracy, in the Light of Reason, History, and Scripture; in which Certain Demagogues in Tennessee and elsewhere, are Shown up in their true Colors. In addition, Brownlow published a

¹⁶ Sister Mary de Lourdes Gohmann, Political Nativism in Tennessee to 1860, Gettysburg, PA: Times and News Publishing Co., 1938, 118-119.

¹⁷ Knoxville Whig, March 21, 1855.

¹⁸ Ibid, Oct. 7, 1854.

collection of 13 pro-Know-Nothing letters in 1855, specifically with the gubernatorial campaign in mind. The collection was aptly named The American's Text Book. In it nearly all evils of the country were attributed to foreign influence and the recommendation was made that a measure be passed "prohibiting the President of the United States by and with the advice of the Senate to appoint persons of foreign birth..."¹⁹

Brownlow's commitment to the American party was thus unquestioned, but why, exactly, did former Whigs like Brownlow believe the Know-Nothings were a viable political option in Tennessee? As of the 1850 U.S. Census, the foreign-born population in Tennessee numbered 5,638 and there was a total of three Catholic churches in the state with a seating capacity of 1,300. These numbers are extracted from a total white and free colored population of 763,258.²⁰ How could the Know-Nothings qualify a foreign threat within the state? Certainly the three largest urban centers of Tennessee (Memphis, Nashville, and Knoxville), particularly Memphis, could point to a rapidly growing foreign population. In 1854 there were about 4,000 Irish and 1,400 Germans in Memphis, equalling about 32% of the total population or about 42% of the white inhabitants.²¹ In addition,

¹⁹Tricamo, 120.

²⁰The Seventh Census of the United States, 1850 (Washington, 1853), 595-96.

²¹Ella Lonn, Foreigners in the Confederacy, Chapel Hill, 1940. Cited in Darrell W. Overdyke, The Know-Nothing Party in the South, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 8.

two German newspapers, one each in Memphis and Nashville, were publishing by 1854. But what did the foreign /Catholic threat mean to those outside urban areas or those in urban areas who were skeptical about such warnings? What motivation did they have for joining the Know-Nothings?

A partial explanation has already been provided and is restated in the words of Michael Holt: "Know-Nothingism was largely a vehicle for the former Whigs to continue opposition to the Democrats once the Whig party had collapsed."²² Another piecemeal answer is offered by Overdyke who emphasizes Tennessee's perception of itself as a bastion of American politics, values, and leadership after sending such favorite sons as Jackson and Polk into the presidency, as well as numerous others into important positions in Washington. "The small number of Catholic churches was not necessarily an important deterrent to the rise of anti-Catholic feeling. As a Southern state, as a part of the great America, Tennessee could take the burden of others upon her shoulders, and this she attempted to do."²³

The influence of personality, always a factor in antebellum politics, is another consideration. As voters saw familiar names like T.A.R. Nelson, Charles Ready, and Felix Zollicoffer included among the ranks of the Know-Nothings the prospects of a new, secretive party probably seemed less threatening. However, the one name conspicuously absent was that of John Bell. Bell was at

²²Holt, 165-67.

²³Overdyke, 31.

least a passive supporter of the Know-Nothings but always insisted on remaining outside the party fringes, his inherent conservatism perhaps inhibiting him from joining a coalition shrouded in secrecy and surrounded by suspicion. Regardless, Bell did go on record as saying that, although not a member, his best service to his country would be rendered through the American party. He went on to claim that the influx of foreigners threatened "to undermine our institutions." Consequently, he did not think "that the organization of a political party upon the policy of withholding the support and suffrages of the members of that party in the public elections from Roman Catholics and naturalized citizens -- and that is all the American party propose[d] to do, could be shown to be an attempt to establish a religious test or to proscribe any class of citizens."²⁴ It is somewhat ironic that this justification of the Know-Nothings could come from the same John Bell who had spoken the following words only four years earlier, counseling others to beware of self-righteous religious groups and other sectarians:

From the nature of this inherent element of division, it will be readily perceived that one of the most active influences to be encountered by the statesman who desires to preserve our system of government is the spirit of fanaticism, religious and philanthropic.²⁵

²⁴Taken from an address at Knoxville. Knoxville Whig, Nov. 3, 1855, Republican Banner, Nov. 4, 1855.

²⁵Congressional Globe, 31 Cong., Appendix, July 3, 5, 6, 1850.

Whatever their reasons, most Whigs entered the Know-Nothing camp with few qualms. The party's politically conservative position of conciliation and anti-foreignism provided a comfortable fit for former Whigs. Hope returned that the Unionist coalition that had brought them victory in 1850 could be reassembled. The nativist issue could go hand-in-hand with the contention that much of the Free-Soil support came from immigrants. Thus northern agitation, to some extent, could be quelled via measures like tougher naturalization laws.

The Democrats countered by claiming that southern Know-Nothings had direct ties to northern abolitionists. In a letter to the Nashville Daily Union and American from a Vermont man, the accusation was made that Know-Nothingism in the North was abolitionism and that it would trap southerners by eliminating its abolition features from its program and inserting anti-Catholic doctrines.²⁶ The battle between the two parties to establish themselves as the best defenders of slavery was renewed. The result was an increasingly harder line by the Democrats on such issues as the Kansas question as a means of clearly delineating party lines.

The 1855 elections were approaching and the Know-Nothings would prove to be a formidable opponent. Despite a short period of time in which to establish themselves, the Americans were able to construct an extensive network within the state by the summer

²⁶ Daily Union and American, June 28, 1855.

of 1855. Because of the party's code of secrecy, information on the infrastructure and number of members in the party is sketchy at best. Figures ranged from a guess of 17,000 members by Andrew Johnson in a letter to his son-in-law to an estimation of 60,000 members by Brownlow.²⁷ Organization on the local level consisted of the notorious secret councils (numbering 500 throughout the state according to Brownlow²⁸) which were directly answerable to the state council, headed by former Whig governor William Campbell. The Know-Nothings thus entered their first statewide elections in 1855 with good reason to hope for success. The Democrats would have no walkover. The truism of local Democrat Cave Johnson would ring accurate again: "Our state is the most nearly balanced in the Union, success depending mainly on the organization and activity of the party; the party out being generally successful because the more active."²⁹

If there was any doubt that the Whig party was dead the 1855 election ruled out all such thoughts. The Whigs held no convention. The anti-Democratic candidate, Meredith P. Gentry, actually announced his candidacy from his home in February 1855 and later accepted the support of the Know-Nothings who endorsed him at a Nashville meeting in May. The obvious Democratic choice

²⁷ Johnson to David T. Patterson, Feb. 17, 1855, Johnson Papers. Knoxville Whig, July 7, 1855.

²⁸ Knoxville Whig, July 7, 1855.

²⁹ Cited in George L. Sioussat, "Tennessee and National Parties," Annual Report of the American Historical Association (1914), 245-258.

for governor was Johnson after he decided to seek re-election.

The themes of Johnson's 1855 platform were very similar to the ones from 1853: state indebtedness, change of the penitentiary labor, modification of the revenue law so far as merchants' license was concerned, common schools, the propriety of improving road systems, and amendments to the Constitution. But it was clear the "paramount issue between Gentry and Johnson was Know-Nothingism."³⁰ The proposed focus of attack was made explicit in the second resolution of the March 7 Democratic convention:

Resolved: That the democratic party has never hesitated or feared to make an open and candid declaration of its creed and principles; that we regard all secret political clubs as at war with the genius and spirit of our Republican Institutions; that the secret oath-bound political club, commonly called the Know-Nothings, in its attempts to abridge the rights of conscience and create religious tests in the selection of men for office, is violative of the Constitution and dangerous to the public liberty; that it is but a weak invention of the enemies of the Democratic party; and that we will fight this secret enemy with the same energy and ardor which in times past has enabled us to defeat and drive from the field open and undisguised foes.³¹

Johnson, accordingly, had a stock anti-Know_Nothing speech with which to keep Gentry on the defensive in 1855. A choice portion read:

...the Devil, his Satanic majesty the Prince of Darkness, who presides over the secret conclave held in Pandemonium, makes war upon all branches of Christ's

³⁰ Campbell, 84.

³¹ Knoxville Whig, March 31, 1855.

Church. The Know-Nothings advocate and defend none but make war upon all Churches and thus far Become the allies of the Prince of Darkness...[They are] a denomination bound together by secret and terrible oaths, the first of which, on the very initiation, fixes and requires them to carry a lie in their mouths!

Show me the dimensions of a Know-Nothing, and I will show you a huge reptile, upon whose neck the foot of every honest man ought to be placed.³²

Despite Gentry's reportedly formidable oral skills, he was unable to stave off most of Johnson's thrusts at Know-Nothingism. Part of this deficiency was due to the fact that the American party platform that Gentry stood on in 1855 included no attacks on Democratic actions of the past two years. The Know-Nothings' only plank relating directly to state politics was a resolution calling for "some adequate and permanent provision for general education."³³

In addition to having to defend Know-Nothing principles, Gentry also had to answer charges about his supposed "softness" on slavery. In a speech at Clarksville on June 5, 1855, Johnson cited examples to back his point: 1) Gentry's opposition to the 1850 Compromise and favoring of the admission of California as a free state; 2) his vote for the abolition of the slave trade in Washington D.C.; 3) his declaration in an 1848 speech that if he were President and the Proviso passed both Houses he would not veto it; 4) his vote for the abrogation of the veto power, which "would have enabled the abolitionists to run rough shod over

³²From Overdyke, 108-09.

³³Daily Union and American, June 28, 1855.

southern rights"; 5) his vote to prevent slaveholders from going with their slaves into the territory acquired from Mexico.³⁴

Johnson was apparently going into the 1855 election with a very strong hand, but he was not without his doubts. To Johnson, the big "x factor" in the campaign would be the newly injected temperance issue. In another letter to his son-in-law, Johnson wrote: "What the prohibitory voters will do is not known as yet...if they could succeed in bringing these two elements [the Know-Nothings and temperance voters] in to his Support it would most unquestionably secure his election."³⁵ Gentry, though never openly advocating prohibition, was more sympathetic to the movement because of the frequent connection made between foreigners and drunkenness. What votes the temperance movement could command would go primarily to Gentry.

Johnson had good reason to be wary of his opponent. The 1855 election recorded the largest vote total in the history of the state (132,999) until that time. Johnson prevailed 67,139-65,860, but this represented a .4% decrease in the Democratic share from the 1853 election. East Tennessee, the hub of anti-foreignism and anti-Catholicism, was largely responsible for the Democratic slide. In 1853 Johnson had captured 49.3% of the

³⁴Gentry had supported an amendment on March 3, 1849, to keep Mexican law intact in the territories until July 4, 1850, where by then territorial governments should have been provided (House Journal, 30 Cong., 2 Sess., 641).

³⁵Johnson to David T. Patterson, Feb. 17, 1855, Johnson Papers.

eastern vote. In 1855 this figure dropped to 47.1%. Meanwhile there were Democratic gains percentage wise in Middle and West Tennessee. Perhaps the most interesting note is the increase in Democratic votes in West Tennessee from 14,108 in 1853 to 15,482 in 1855. However, Shelby County, which Whigs were only able to carry by approximately 100 votes in 1851 and 1853, went to the Know-Nothings by almost 400 votes. Apparently, Memphis voters, experiencing a near deluge of foreign immigrants, found the prejudices of the Americans quite appealing. In fact, the Know-Nothings carried the other two major urban centers (Davidson and Knox Counties) convincingly, which seemed to confirm the salience of the anti-foreign arguments of the Know-Nothings in these areas as well.³⁶

Aside from the gubernatorial race, Democrats gained one seat in the U.S. House, evening the delegation at five apiece. In the General Assembly the anti-Democrats (some were still calling themselves Whigs) held a majority of three in the senate (14-11) while the Democrats won the lower house 38-37. District by district party lines were holding firm. Only 11 instances of changes in district party allegiance were recorded for the 75 lower house elections, compared to 11 in 1853 and 12 in 1851.

Definite party divisions were still in place as demonstrated by the strong opposition the Johnson administration faced in General Assembly. One of the most vivid examples was Johnson's 3-time failure to secure a board of appointees to be Inspectors

³⁶ Campbell, 269-275.

of the Penitentiary.³⁷ In addition, the Assembly of 1855-57 ignored Johnson's calls to liquidate the state bank, formulate a tax revision, and eliminate convict labor training.³⁸

It does not appear that the Know-Nothings were very successful in passing legislation either. No laws aimed directly at discriminating against foreigners or Catholics were established. One early, feeble attempt was made by B.F. McFarland (Amer.- Jefferson County) to offer an amendment to limit grants of land to native-born citizens, but this was defeated handily.³⁹

The overall record of the 1855-57 General Assembly was itself rather unremarkable. Controversies over railroad construction were relatively rare due to the fact that most of the major lines were complete or under construction. Of the positive legislation that was passed, much of it was continuations of earlier work. For example, the act which established an agricultural bureau in 1854 was amended. The changes called for additional support of county agricultural societies and the authorization of \$30,000 worth of bonds to

³⁷ Knoxville Whig, Nov. 17, 1855.

³⁸ Johnson deprecated teaching convicts a trade. Not only was it costly -- "an incubus on the treasury" -- but it would have a deleterious effect "upon the mechanical interests of the country", and "qualify the villian [sic] without reforming the man." Leroy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, eds. The Papers of Andrew Johnson, Vol.2, 1852-1857. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1970), xxii.

³⁹ Knoxville Whig, Nov. 3, 1855.

construct permanent fairgrounds in the vicinity of Nashville.⁴⁰ Collection and distribution of the new local school tax, formulated in February 1854, also began. The increase in school funds was dramatic. Frank M. Hodgson, in his dissertation on education in Montgomery County, found that common school funds went from 1,664.43 in 1853 to 2,659.17 by 1861.⁴¹ Concerning new legislation, modification of the Free Banking Law to guard against wildcat banking and the appropriation of \$150,000 for completion of the state capitol were some of the most significant actions.

Locally then, 1855 was a quiet year after the campaign rhetoric of August began to die down. The Know-Nothings were young but they had made a strong showing. 1856 was their year to discover if what they had was a truly viable national party. The results would be extremely disappointing and signal the beginning of the end for a party that had only just begun. The fate of the Know-Nothings would essentially be decided before the 1856 election ever took place when the national party failed to find a compromise plank on the slavery extension issue.

In December of 1855, William Campbell, president of the state council, issued letters to each congressional district ordering each to elect a delegate to represent the state party at the national council to be held on February 18, 1856, and the

⁴⁰ Tennessee Acts, 1855-56, Chap. 95.

⁴¹ Frank M. Hodgson, The Growth and Development of the Public School Movement in Montgomery County, Tennessee, 1806-1913, Dissertation, George Peabody College for Teachers, 1984, 28.

nominating convention of February 22. Accompanying these ten delegates were to be A.J. Donelson and T.A.R. Nelson, selected as at-large delegates. Nelson later refused to go on account of business affairs, but the Tennessee delegation was still active in the national convention.

Before the delegates left a state convention was held in Nashville at which all the resolutions of the June 1855 Philadelphia Convention were re-affirmed. However, it was also resolved to instruct the delegates to procure the abolition of all ceremonials and secrecy surrounding the party.⁴² The attacks Gentry had suffered from Johnson in the previous election perhaps convinced many that secrecy often led to suspicion and could prove costly in a campaign.

The other notable resolution of the state convention was the fifth. It asserted that public education of youth was the best means of perpetuating American liberties, reading: "the States should provide for the education by establishing common schools throughout their limits, and that the Protestant Bible, as their text book, should never be excluded from them."⁴³

227 delegates were present at the national convention on February 22. It had been agreed in the preliminary meeting four days earlier to abandon the code of secrecy, but the convention itself turned out to be less harmonious. The bitterness in the northern wing of the party was largely a remnant of the 1855

⁴² Knoxville Whig, Dec. 29, 1855.

⁴³ Ibid, Feb. 23, 1856.

national convention. It was at that convention that the resolution commonly called the twelfth section -- stating that Congress had no right to legislate on slavery in the states, and should not legislate on such issues for the territories -- was passed, redrawing the sectional lines within the party.

At the 1856 convention the northern states refused to be bound by the twelfth section of the platform. It was finally adopted, but in a mitigated form that miffed many southerners. Meanwhile, northern delegates "bolted in dudgeon because they failed to secure the adoption of a plank which advocated the restoration of the Missouri Compromise line."⁴⁴ Southern leaders were thus left in control of the convention and settled on the Fillmore-Donelson ticket.

With an alienated northern wing, the Know-Nothings had no chance of winning a national election unless it could be forced into the House. Tennessee Democrats were aware of this strategy and used it to play on southern fears, warning voters that if the Know-Nothings forced the election into the House it could in fact lead to the election of the Republican candidate Fremont. In addition, Democrats attacked Fillmore as an abolitionist. In a speech at Nashville on July 15, 1856, Johnson proved to be one of the most vociferous adherents to this belief:

...Mr. Fillmore never gave a vote or made a speech while in the Congress of the United States, in which he sustained or favored the institution of slavery in the smallest degree...It is not necessary for me to prove

⁴⁴Gohmann, 131.

by record evidence, what we admitted to be true in commencement of the argument, that Mr. Fremont is an Abolitionist. But I deny, and challenge refutation, that Mr. Fremont is as great an Abolitionist as Mr. Fillmore.⁴⁵

Johnson's charge seemed to reflect the southern propensity for damning all northerners who did not defend the peculiar institution as abolitionists. Johnson's words, though, did merit consideration for many Tennessee voters and it is apparent that the fear of an abolitionist president did have some effect, even on old line Whigs. Gustavas Henry, former Whig gubernatorial candidate, for example, received a letter from his brother after the election saying the following: "I rejoiced so heartily at the defeat of Fremont, that I almost ceased to grieve about... Fillmore's defeat." He went on to remark that Buchanan's victory was a "lesser triumph."⁴⁶

Despite a relatively lukewarm Democratic campaign Buchanan prevailed in Tennessee with 73,638 to Fillmore's 66,128.⁴⁷ The Democratic majority in Middle Tennessee increased to a nearly insurmountable 7,000 votes. East Tennessee remained anti-Democratic, but only by a little more than 1,000 votes. The scene of real political change continued to be West Tennessee, where the 1856 election marked the first time a Democratic

⁴⁵The Papers of Andrew Johnson, Vol. 1, 399.

⁴⁶W. Henry to Gustavas Henry, Nov. 24, 1856, Henry Papers.

⁴⁷For personal observations of the Democratic campaign see Johnson to A.O.P. Nicholson, June 27, 1856, and Johnson to Robert Johnson, June 28, 1856, Johnson Papers.

presidential or gubernatorial candidate had been able to capture that section. The increasingly pro-southern rhetoric of the Democrats was becoming more attractive to the west, containing some of the largest plantation systems in the state. It was also becoming quite obvious that Middle and West Tennessee's interest in sustaining slavery was much greater than that of the eastern section. And this interest was becoming more and more a part of Tennessee politics. It is probably no coincidence that many of the most tenuous anti-Democratic voters were in the west. Toward the mid and late 1850's several began defecting to the Democratic ranks. Among them was Whig Senator James Jones of Memphis, who actually backed the Democratic gubernatorial candidate in 1857.

With only the wreckage of a national party behind them, the Know-Nothings had dim prospects for 1857. The pessimism surrounding the gubernatorial campaign was reflected by the fact that no big name anti-Democrat stepped forward to solicit a nomination. Doing so seemed politically suicidal. Some of the names mentioned were: E.B. Alexander, a veteran Knoxville Whig, Felix Zollicoffer, Charles Ready, and former governor William Campbell. However the nod eventually went to an obscure General Assembly member, Robert Hatton, from Lebanon. Hatton, though apparently enjoying the support of Bell, was a relative unknown outside his own section, which seemed to reiterate his sacrificial status. The Democrats had a lock on the governor's office and looked to fill it with Isham Harris after Johnson decided to step down and run for the U.S. Senate.

The Know-Nothings knew the party was on the decline but still made a feeble attempt to augment their vote total in 1857 by returning to a more Whiggish program and deemphasizing the anti-foreign doctrine of the party.⁴⁸ Among the resolutions of the Nashville nominating convention, held on May 1, were a lamentation over the "systematic agitation of the slavery question," approval of distribution of public lands monies, and a call for congressional aid in the construction of a Pacific railroad. Nativism alone was simply not a winning formula in Tennessee and the Know-Nothings recognized this with a subtle shift toward old line Whiggery. "Fearing to promulgate its nativistic tenants, the party even began to disclaim them, and to assure the people that it was organized on the same basis as the Whigs."⁴⁹

Major issues simply failed to materialize in the 1857 campaign. The one Hatton seemed to stress the most was distribution of public lands monies, perhaps partly because Bell was pushing a bill for equable distribution in the Senate.⁵⁰ Though maybe attractive to politicians, distribution instilled little excitement among the citizenry.

The Democrats, meanwhile, continued their pro-South, pro-slavery rhetoric. Among the more interesting examples was tied

⁴⁸ Knoxville Whig, May 16, 1857; William Campbell to David Campbell, May 25, 1857, Campbell Papers.

⁴⁹ Gohmann, 145.

⁵⁰ Congressional Globe, 34 Cong., 3 Sess. (Feb. 17, 1857), 714 ff.

to Know-Nothing support of distribution. "In a somewhat convoluted fashion the Democratic press sought to argue that distribution was linked to the abolition of slavery in the states, for such monies would enable the states to provide for compensated emancipation."⁵¹

Because of the poor organization of the Know-Nothings in 1857 the Democrats did not need a "winning issue." They only had to stay the course. Their opposition was largely crushing itself under its own weight. Harris would win the election with the most lopsided vote in the history of the state up to that time, 71,178 to 59,807, or a 54.3% share of the total vote. Even East Tennessee fell to the Democrats with a 1.6% margin separating the two parties. Only two counties (Campbell and Claiborne) actually changed party allegiance, but it seems that a significant number of voters, formally anti-Democratic, were now voting for Harris because turnout (39,488 according to Campbell) was only about 2,500 less compared to 1855, when Gentry carried the section with 52.9%. The Democrats, of course, enjoyed even more substantial victories in the middle (57.4%) and west (53.0%).

In congressional elections, only three Americans would return to the House. In the lower house of the General Assembly the Democrats rolled up a 40-35 majority, representing a gain of two seats over 1855. The state senate, likewise, was securely

⁵¹Bergeron, 129. The Union (July 14, 1857) wrote: "Above all, we shall not fail to expose the lurking serpent of Abolitionism which lies concealed among the fragrant flowers, and tempting fruits, and gushing fountains of the garden of 'distribution'."

Democratic (17-8). Thus the Democrats were in nearly absolute control of state politics for the next two years.

The anti-Democrats had reached their nadir but remained defiant under siege. One of the first acts of the legislature was a resolution calling upon Bell to redeem his pledge to resign if his opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Bill evoked dissatisfaction in the state.⁵² Bell refused and served out his term until 1859, but the General Assembly assured that no anti-Democrat would replace him by electing A.O.P. Nicholson two years early along with Andrew Johnson, who would fill the seat vacated by Jones in 1857.

The Democrats were winning and winning big in Tennessee with a hard line on the extension question and increasingly virulent pro-southern verbiage which alarmed their more conservative opponents. The "Southern movement" was beginning to take hold in Tennessee, but there were still numerous conservative stalwarts wary of any sectional agitation. One of the political weather vanes they eyed was the southern commercial conventions. The anti-Democratic press became extremely critical of these conventions as little more than secessionist gatherings. The Nashville Patriot sounded one of the more animated denunciations:

In the past they [the conventions] were doubtless good and highly patriotic, however, ... for two or three more years past these conventions seem to have been composed of inconsiderate political hotspurs, rather than of the solid and deeply thinking commercial of the Southern country. They have been appointed hastily, and have

⁵² Tennessee Acts 1857-58, 423-425.

hastily packed their portmanteaus and trundled themselves into the convention, with but one idea in their heads, and that, commercial non-intercourse with the North.⁵³

Nashville, in fact, had refused to send delegates to the 1856 commercial convention in Savannah. When the 1857 convention was announced as coming to Knoxville anti-Democrats, and conservatives in general, remained suspicious. The Banner discouraged participation, warning that the "noisiest and most officious men were blatant Disunionists who were glad to avail themselves of the opportunity to sow seeds of discontent among the Southern people."⁵⁴

Tennessee Democrats were becoming increasingly synonymous with this spreading "radicalism," according to their opponents. However, these conservative sentinels had no party in which to channel their political clout. The Know-Nothings were defunct, which even Brownlow admitted after the 1857 election.⁵⁵ The Democrats, of course, gloated. The departure of "Sam" (the American party) was recorded mockingly in the Memphis Daily Appeal on August 8, 1857:

The last we heard of "Sam" was that on Thursday night after the election. The old man was seen slowly wending his way on a pair of crutches, with his feet dragging on the ground, for old Massachusetts. Sam, when asked whither he was going, with faint heart and tremulous voice replied -- I was born in the Hartford

⁵³ Nashville Patriot, Aug. 8, 1857.

⁵⁴ Republican Banner, Dec. 28, 1856.

⁵⁵ Knoxville Whig, Aug. 22, 1857.

Convention, and from that day to this, I have been plotting treason against the South. I was told that if I changed my name, I would be sneaking into the South, in the night, and by plotting in secret and oath bound conclaves at the hour of mid-night, succeed in my long proposed ruin of the South. But alas! the keen-eyed Democrats recognized me in disguise, and if I can only scrape with my life to Old Massachusetts, Wilson and Sumner may save my life. If I can only once more reach that old enemy of the South, I will never again below the Mason Dixon's line.⁵⁶

Know-Nothing council meetings were heard of as late as 1859, but the party failed to make a formal appearance after 1857. However, before it faded, the state party showed definite signs of returning to its Whiggish roots. A recovery was in the making which would attempt, and to a large extent succeed, in luring back many traditional Whigs who had excused themselves from the Know-Nothing interlude. It remained to be seen whether Whiggery and Whig supporters, like the veteran Whig organ, the Nashville Republican Banner, would fulfill its pledge to avoid politics altogether and "turn its interests to commerce, agriculture, and manufacturing" or if it would re-engage the Democrats as sectional agitation reached its most fevered pitch.

⁵⁶ Memphis Daily Appeal, Aug. 8, 1857.

Percentage of Democratic Vote by Section, 1855-59*

<u>Section</u>	<u>1855</u>	<u>1856</u>	<u>1857</u>
East	47.1	48.6	50.8
Middle	53.2	56.0	57.4
West	49.6	51.5	53.0

Total Votes

<u>Party</u>	<u>1855</u>	<u>1856</u>	<u>1857</u>
Anti-Democratic	65,860	66,128	59,807
Democratic	67,139	73,638	71,178
TOTAL	132,999	139,766	130,985

% Voter Participation

<u>1855</u>	<u>1856</u>	<u>1857</u>
80-83%	82-85%	75-78%

Chapter 3: The Last Years 1857-1861

...there is danger of a general disbanding, unless the extreme tone North and South shall cease, or conservative men, especially in the South, come to our rescue. We have had to fight between two fires, and the wonder is not that we have been unsuccessful, but that we still live as a party...

Neill S. Brown to John Bell,
August 10, 1858

Given the bleakness of their political outlook in 1857, the comeback of the Tennessee Whigs in the final years before the Civil War is all the more remarkable. After suffering the worst defeat of any anti-Democratic party in the 1857 elections, by the following state elections the Whigs had recouped some of their losses and began retaking former Whig strongholds. The secret of their success was two-fold: a return to traditionally Whiggish principles and strokes of good fortune.

Nativism on its own had been proven deficient in its attractiveness to Tennessee voters. Therefore, the initial push of the Whig element was to distance itself from direct ties to the American label. The collapse of the American party on the national level could only further this incentive. What emerged was another variation on the Whig party -- called the Opposition party -- but in a much more decentralized form than its Whig predecessor of the early 50's. It seemed more an alliance than a party. Strong personalities emerged, but focused leadership did not. Part of this was due to being on the political "outs" (i.e. Bell was a lame duck Senator by November 1857), but there was

also a recognition that greater respect and egalitarianism had to be accorded to the East by Middle Tennessee Oppositionists, in light of the weakening foothold in West Tennessee. This "democratic" component of the Opposition party was, not only necessary, but endorsed by former Whig leaders within the new party. Neill S. Brown, in an 1858 letter to John Bell, went as far as to recommend the cancellation of a party convention for the upcoming state elections. Instead, he recommended bringing out "some good old Whig" by public men through local meetings, legislative assemblies, and other primary meetings. Brown's suggestions clearly indicate a willingness to go outside the bounds of the traditional party system.¹

Further aiding the Opposition party was a run of events, particularly the Dred Scott decision and the Buchanan Administration's support of the Lecompton constitution, that made the danger to slavery seem less imminent. Though both were trumpeted by Tennessee Democrats, Oppositionists also had good reason to applaud. De-emphasizing the slavery issue was the key to the rehabilitation of Whiggery. Dred Scott and Lecompton provided supporting evidence for Whig claims that southern rights could be vindicated through the federal system and that those who persisted in agitating the question or speaking of secession were demagogues of the worst sort.

Not surprisingly then, Oppositionists insisted that there

¹Neill S. Brown to John Bell, August 10, 1858, John Bell Papers.

were issues more important and relevant than slavery extension. Those who continued the sectional agitation were thus decried as beating a dead horse. The concept of an irrepressible conflict was expressedly rejected and answered by the charge that sectional politicians -- both northern and southern -- had politicized slavery. This was essentially the weak link in the Opposition party, which Kenneth Stampf makes reference to in America in 1857.

Implicit in this conservative explanation was the assumption that there were national problems of greater importance than slavery on which Republicans [and southern Democrats] should have focused, that other available issues would have resonated with voters quite as effectively, that politicians were free to create and politicize whatever issues they pleased, and that they probably would have fared as well with one issue as another. Yet, the inability of the remnants of the Whig party, after the decline of nativism, to find and effectively politicize alternative issues, discredited their indictment of anti-slavery Republicans.²

Nonetheless, the Opposition did attempt to politicize its own issues concerning both the state and nation. The most inviting target was Democratic economic policies given the financial panic that occurred in 1857 under Democratic national and state administrations. Whereas many state Democrats were placing the blame squarely on the banks, with several even calling for their abolishment, the Opposition responded in a Whiggish manner, claiming there was nothing inherently evil about banks themselves. Instead, they insisted, their faults were the

² Stampf, Kenneth, M. America in 1857, 112-13.

result of slack regulation and specie mismanagement.

Nativism also continued as an undercurrent of Opposition orthodoxy, if not an outright minor plank. American idealists, stranded by the defunct Know-Nothings, became a significant segment of the party. Thus it was politically wise to proffer them this concession, though it could be argued this was not a concession at all but a natural step since the vast majority of party members had been Americans. However, many of the diehard nativists continued to push for more than token offers, insisting that anti-foreignism was the issue to be seized upon. James M. Callum, a Pulaski resident, was representative of the persistent nativist element. In a letter to Bell in the summer of 1857 Callum reiterated the belief that nativism was the issue of crucial importance, needing only a coherent party structure to realize the potential of the anti-foreign vote. The Opposition party could only be seen as an improvement by Callum over the American party, which he called "the most incongruous uncontrollable party we have ever had..."³

However, currency, banking, and nativist issues were not enough to obscure the slavery issue from public consciousness. Perhaps no single event of the late 1850's reflected this more than the Congressional battle over the Lecompton constitution. Lecompton proved once again that sectional agitation had become chronic. The Kansas-Nebraska Act and popular sovereignty, considered by many as the solution to the extension problem,

³James M. Callum to John Bell, June 1857, John Bell Papers.

proved less efficient in practice as it had appeared in theory. As a result, Congress was poised for yet another North-South struggle.

The reaction of Tennessee voters and politicians, like the reaction to Kansas-Nebraska, was decidedly mixed. Both houses of the state legislature -- controlled by Democrats -- passed a resolution calling for the state's congressional delegation to vote for Lecompton and, at the same time, called on Bell to resign because "his constituents disapproved his course on the Kansas-Nebraska Act."⁴

Bell disputed the claim that he had misrepresented his constituents and refused to resign. He did agree to vote for Lecompton if it would mean the cessation of sectional agitation on the slavery issue, saying "What I contend for, as the great interest of the owners of slave property in the South is peace... My great object is to have peace and quiet on the subject of slavery, between the North and South."⁵

Bell's ambivalence was indicative of a similar strain within the state party. Oppositionists could throw their support to Lecompton for the sake of quieting "radicals" and simultaneously enhance their reputation as defenders of southern rights, but in the process they would be supporting a fraudulent constitution which made a mockery of the political system they so ardently defended. Whiggish elements were divided once more. In the

⁴Nashville Daily Union and American, February 11, 1858.

⁵Congressional Globe, 35 Cong., 1 Sess., 1858, 804-813.

party press the Nashville True Whig supported Lecompton while the Banner opposed it, calling it an abstraction that could not protect slavery in Kansas even if it were to pass Congress.⁶

Despite the differences in opinion among Opposition members, there was no sign of the bitterness that surfaced during the Kansas-Nebraska ordeal. Most Oppositionists were at least marginally agreeable to Lecompton and willing to go along with southern Democrats. The English bill, which was designed to submit the Lecompton constitution to a popular vote, was an apparently sufficient measure for those Oppositionists reluctant to vote for direct acceptance of the document by Congress. On April 30 the bill passed the House with the approval of all 10 of Tennessee's delegation, including 3 anti-Democrats.⁷ The bill was passed by the Senate the same day with Bell abstaining for reasons that remain unclear.

The Opposition party was thus able to weather Lecompton intact and gear itself toward the 1859 election with a renewed optimism that had not been seen since the earlier part of the decade. Zollicoffer, noting the growth of unity, made a bold prediction that a majority in the state senate could be had as well as "at least half of the congressional elections."⁸ His forecast was tethered to the sight of "semi-retired" Whigs (i.e.

⁶ Nashville Banner, February 3 and 18, 1858.

⁷ The three anti-Democrats were Horace Maynard (Knoxville), Charles Ready (Murfreesboro), and Felix Zollicoffer (Nashville).

⁸ Zollicoffer to Crittenden, June 27, 1859, Crittenden Papers.

Neill Brown) returning to party politics after shying away from the Americans. Old Whigs were returning because of a restoration of the traditional Whig emphasis on economic matters and faith in government institutions.

The Opposition convention met in Nashville on March 29, 1859, and nominated East Tennessean John Netherland, a state senator from Hawkins County. Netherland's nomination can be interpreted as formal recognition of the consistently anti-Democratic east after a period of neglect. This nomination of an East Tennessean was the first of its kind in any anti-Democratic gubernatorial campaign during the 1850's. Eastern Whigs were, consequently, expected to provide the staunchest support for Netherland. East Tennessee factionalism, often stemming from the controversial Parson Brownlow, would nearly evaporate in 1859. By July the Banner was reporting that eastern factionalism was "overcome" and that there was a "concerted drive" to secure the gubernatorial office for Netherland.⁹

The platform Netherland ran on focused primarily on banking and currency issues. The Oppositionists endorsed a sound and well-regulated banking system whose notes would be payable, when requested, in hard money. The platform also included a plea for preservation of the union, a reaffirmation of constitutional rights concerning slavery, and a call for the end of sectional agitation. The character of the platform was obvious. "Without question the platform stood firmly in the Whig-Know-Nothing

⁹Nashville Banner, July 3, 16, 22, 1859.

tradition -- perhaps old wine in old wine skins."¹⁰

Netherland's opponent was incumbent Isham Harris. After winning a "landslide" election in 1857, Harris was in for a much tougher time against Netherland. His 12,000 vote margin was reduced to a spread of 4,000 in 1859 and percentage losses were experienced in all three sections, the most significant being a 2.6% drop in East Tennessee. The state Democratic percentage fell from 54.3% in 1857 to 52.8% in 1859, roughly equivalent to Buchanan's 1856 victory. The Whigs were on the road to recovery, stimulating local discussion about the party's chances in 1860 if it were to reconstruct a national framework. Nathaniel Taylor, a former U.S. Representative from Carter County, was one of the first to speculate. Following the election he declared the time was ripe for the formation of an "American Whig party."¹¹

Taylor's enthusiasm stemmed from more than just Netherland's impressive showing. Part of Zollicoffer's prophecy had come true as well. 7 of the 10 congressional seats went to Opposition candidates. One of the victories was claimed by Nelson in Andrew Johnson's traditionally Democratic district, a feat heralded by Brownlow, with his penchant for hyperbole, as "the greatest victory that has been achieved in modern times."¹²

In the races for state offices Oppositionists made up even more ground. The Democratic margin in the senate was decreased

¹⁰Bergeron, 131.

¹¹Taylor to Nelson, August 10, 1859.

¹²Knoxville Whig, August 20, 1859.

from 17-8 to 14-11. The lower house remained relatively static with the Democrats gaining only one seat to increase their majority to 41-34.

Democrats still controlled state politics but they had stumbled into 1859. It seems that the Opposition party was able to capitalize on a non-sectional platform at a time when the extension issue was at a relatively low ebb, compared to the controversy surrounding Lecompton in 1858. Southern rights had been vindicated in a constitutional manner and many Tennessee voters were, in fact, looking to move on to other concerns. While the Democrats accused the Opposition party of submissionism and aiding the Republican cause, Oppositionists responded with a platform directed at local economic matters, which, judging by the returns, was a very real concern to Tennessee voters. Some Democrats were able to perceive this in hindsight. Congressman George W. Jones wrote Johnson that the Democrats erred in not taking "a true position upon the currency question" and even the Democratic Union was found admitting the banking issue was more important than the slavery question.¹³

In the long run Oppositionists could not hope for similar conditions to prevail in future elections. A purely sectional party -- the Republicans -- had been established, which was openly hostile to any thoughts of slavery expansion. Consequently, several southern states threatened secession should

¹³George W. Jones to Johnson, August 9, 1859, Johnson Papers; Nashville Daily Union and American, September 20, 21, 1859.

a Republican candidate be elected in 1860. Fremont had already come perilously close to victory in 1856, but when the national Democratic party split in 1860, Lincoln's election was all but assured. The 1860 election then, constituted the first "wave" of the secession crisis that Daniel Crofts refers to in Reluctant Confederates. How Tennessee handled this first wave and the two successive ones in February and April of 1861 is the nearly exclusive theme of Tennessee politics during the 1860-61 period.

The first question to be asked is, given the issue of disunion as the exclusive concern of the 1860 election, would voting patterns be disrupted by a massive shift to the self-proclaimed bisectonal candidates -- Douglas and Bell -- or would returns remain consistent with previous elections? The question is somewhat misleading because it assumes that the only other candidate on the Tennessee ballot, Breckinridge, was the disunion candidate. In fact, most of those who voted for Breckinridge probably perceived him as the only candidate who could hold the country together, and thus, cannot be labelled as pro-secession voters. They were further encouraged to support Breckinridge by slogans that declared a vote for Bell or Douglas was necessarily a vote for Lincoln since it would "split" southern votes and insure Lincoln's election.

The drive to project each candidate as more pro-union than the others was reflective of the concerns of Tennessee voters. Tennessee was not ready to secede in November of 1860, regardless of who won the election, but it did intend to keep the rest of

the South in by defeating Lincoln. Supporters of Bell and Douglas hoped to achieve this by removing the election to the House while Breckinridge supporters sought to win the election outright.

For all the interest placed on how the Tennessee vote would divide, the results were not really all that surprising. Bell carried the state by a plurality with 69,728 votes (47.7%) while Breckinridge tallied 65,097 (44.6%) and Douglas 11,281 (7.7%). Upon adding Douglas's total to Breckinridge's one sees that the total Democratic vote adds to 52.3%, remarkably close to the levels of 1856 and 1857. Apparently, party lines held firm with partisans who believed their candidate was the best suited for the task at hand.

The kinds of voters and how they voted also indicate this was not a significant election in terms of vote reapportionment. Slaveowners were slightly more likely to vote than nonslaveowners (87% turnout versus 75% turnout). However, when slaveowners did vote they actually leaned toward Bell, which is an indication of the conservatism among slaveowners themselves. Of the approximately 37,000 enfranchised slaveowners, 18,000 voted for Bell while only 14,000 went for either of the two Democrats. It was among nonslaveowners where Democrats held the edge. 63,000 of Tennessee's 150,000 enfranchised nonslaveowners voted for the split Democratic ticket. 52,000 voted for Bell.

Another interesting note is that among the three Tennessee counties (Fayette, Haywood, and Williamson) with slave

populations constituting over 50% of the entire population, none polled as much as 30% for Breckinridge. All three went to Bell. Williamson County, which had been Whiggish in the past, cast over 60% of its vote for Bell. Fayette and Haywood, Democratic counties in 1859, were somewhat more of a surprise. The Democratic defeat there can be partly attributed to the popularity of Douglas and the subsequent "split" of the Democratic vote, but Bell still tallied a majority regardless of the division.

Perhaps the most remarkable eligible voters of 1860 were those who did not vote at all. 23% of the electorate never bothered to cast a ballot, which represented a turnout rate even lower than that for the 1856 presidential election (21% did not vote in 1856). This leaves the impression that voters were not much more determined to go to the polls in 1860 than they had been in earlier elections. However, this does not mean the 1860 election was deemed less important by voters, -- 77% is still a high turnout rate -- it simply re-emphasizes the highly competitive nature of Tennessee politics before secession ever became the principle issue.

When voters did come to the polls they voted much as they always had. Crofts found that the correlation between the 1860 Constitutional Union (Whig) vote and Whig voting in all of the elections of the previous decade never dipped below a .9 coefficient with the highest correlation (.96) occurring between the 1860 election and the 1855 and 1856 elections.

Tennessee voters answered as they did, not because they dismissed the possibility or significance of disunion which might occur upon Lincoln's election, but because most -- including Democrats -- did not believe Lincoln's election would warrant such an action. In the month before the election the Banner had declared, "we believe a majority of the people of the South would be in favor... of tolerating the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln" and added that it was also certain Lincoln would not "violate the Constitution."¹⁴

Among the Democrats, the idea of secession tied to a Lincoln victory was generally unpopular as well. Andrew Johnson would carry the torch for the unionist Democrats from 1860 and through the war itself. By June of 1861 Johnson would be in the minority of his party, but in the fall of 1860 most Democrats were still echoing Johnson's pledge to "stay inside the Union and fight for Southern rights."¹⁵

What secessionists there were in Tennessee in November of 1860 were unable to gain momentum because unionists remained organized, active, and ready to respond with countermoves of their own. In reaction to Lincoln's election and the subsequent call for a special November 26 meeting by secessionist elements in Knoxville, a November 24 meeting was quickly scheduled by unionists in Johnson's hometown of Greeneville. The meeting was non-partisan in character, reflecting a cease-fire in partisan

¹⁴ Nashville Banner, October 23, 1860.

¹⁵ Memphis Daily Appeal, October 25, 1860.

warfare that would endure in the state for the remainder of the secession crisis. Among those in attendance were Johnson, T.A.R. Nelson, and Nathaniel Taylor. Another non-partisan meeting was called in Shelbyville to profess "an undying devotion to the Constitution of the United States and the Union of the States." The principal speaker was a Democrat, former congressman George W. Jones from Fayetteville.¹⁶

Unionist fears were not imaginary. Secessionists were on the move in the winter of 1860-61 but were seemingly not as well organized. For example, an East Tennessee secessionist meeting gathered in November and penned a resolution calling for a special session of the legislature so that delegates for a southern convention could be chosen. Somehow one participant, John M. Fleming, a lawyer and Bell supporter from Hawkins County, was able to avert a vote on the resolution and adjourn the meeting until December 8. Oliver Temple, later wrote of the gathering, "Why the leaders in that movement [secession] allowed the meeting to adjourn without a vote... has always been a mystery."¹⁷

Apprehension about secessionist organizations was also enhanced by a glance at its members. Two of the most vocal proponents of secession were Governor Harris and Senator A.O.P. Nicholson. The pair were relatively isolated in November of 1860, but both, especially Harris, would become more active by

¹⁶ George W. Jones to [unknown], November 20, 1860.

¹⁷ Temple, Notable Men of Tennessee, 36.

the February 1861 special election.

Harris summoned the legislature into special session on January 7, 1861. He then opened the session with a message containing an extensive tirade against abolitionist persecution. In the message Harris essentially echoed the words of Chief Justice Tanney in the Dred Scott decision from four years earlier. He claimed the Constitution recognized property in slaves and went on to assert there was "no grant of power to the Federal Government to interfere with this species of property," except "the power coupled with the duty, common to all civil Governments to protect the rights of property..."¹⁸

Harris was poised to take Tennessee out of the union, especially after seeing South Carolina pass a secession ordinance a few weeks earlier. Consequently, the governor urged the legislature to place a referendum in front of the voters to determine Tennessee's status in relation to the union. In doing so, Harris formally erased partisan lines. The struggle became one of unionists versus disunionists, leaving many with strange, new bedfellows. The most unusual pairing occurred when Johnson defected to the unionist side, where nearly all of the Whiggish element and conservative Democrats had taken up residence.

The overwhelming union sentiment within the Whig ranks needs to be clarified. Unionism came in different shades. Most of the masses were not unconditional unionists, but, rather, attached

¹⁸The Secession Debates, Reel 15, 5. Found in the Vanderbilt University Central Library Media Room.

conditions to their sentiments. Crofts labels them as anticoercionists, or extended ultimatists, and fast ultimatists. Generally speaking, anticoercionists were prepared to stay in the union as long as the North withheld provocation while fast ultimatists sought northern concessions to further insure southern rights.

In February of 1861 the majority of Tennesseans occupied this middle ground, which they demonstrated in a two-fold vote on whether or not to hold a secession convention and selection of convention delegates should the convention be approved. The convention proposal was soundly defeated by a margin of 69,387-57,798. Only West Tennessee actually supported the notion of a convention (22,623-7,864), which was indicative of the strongly "pro-southern" character of that section in comparison to the other two sections. West Tennessee, especially the Memphis area, was clearly ready to join the Confederacy even at this early date. Only 5 of the section's 18 counties opposed the convention and these were clustered toward the middle section.¹⁹ In fact, by early spring Memphis merchants had actually summoned their own convention and unanimously passed a resolution calling on West Tennessee to secede even if the rest of the state did not.²⁰

The lingering question seems to be why had the legislature

¹⁹The five counties: Decatur, Henderson, Carroll, McNairy, and Hardin. None of these opposed the convention by more than 70% of the total vote. What is also interesting about these counties is that all 5 had average per capita wealth levels well below the averages for the western section. See Crofts, 154.

²⁰Tricamo, 266.

allowed the referendum to be passed in the first place? Of course it drew the support of ardent secessionists, but why would others support the measure? Unionists were apparently eager to defeat the secessionists in a public forum and were confident they could do so. Some hoped to do this by defeating the convention outright while others actually desired a convention, but one stocked with unionist delegates. By virtue of holding the convention they could make a statement to the North of their determination to protect southern rights without actually withdrawing from the union. 130,000 votes were cast for convention delegates and of these 100,000 went to Unionist candidates.

The breakdown of the February votes shows that Tennessee slaveowners had still not been won over to the secession movement. 21,000 of the 37,000 slaveowners in the state actually voted for the convention, but on the selection of delegates they opted for Unionist candidates on a nearly 3:1 ratio. Approximately 15% of slaveowners did not vote at all, leading one to further question just how dire Tennessee slaveowners pictured their situation.

Whigs again moved as a unified block. 76% of them voted against the convention and 92% selected Unionist candidates should a convention actually come to pass. The Democrats, on the other hand, were much more divided. 27% did not vote at all (compared to 5% of the Whigs). 60% of the remainder voted for the convention with a slight edge going towards the selection of

secession delegates.

The Whig-conservative Democrat faction was thus able to fend off the secession movement with relative ease. However, Tennessee's agreement to remain in the union was a conditional one. Lincoln's call for troops in April, following the firing on Sumter, represented the third wave of the secession crisis. Lincoln's actions gave the disunionists tangible proof that the North was the aggressor and violator of southern rights that they had been claiming all along.

The bulk of unionist resistance crumbled away in the wake of the third wave, convinced that all attempts at preserving the country had been exhausted and now was the time to join sister southern states. On April 30, Senator John A. Minnis introduced a bill to submit an ordinance of secession and independence to the people. The bill passed the senate 20-4 the same day and cleared the lower house 46-21 on May 4. After minor amendments, the bill passed in final form on May 6.

The June 8 election would be little more than a formality. On May 1 Senate Resolution No. 18, authorizing the governor to "appoint three Commissioners on the part of Tennessee, to enter into a Military League with the authorities of the Confederate States," passed the lower house by a 42-25 vote. 14 of the nays came from representatives of East Tennessee counties, the section home to most unconditional unionists.²¹ Harris later appointed three commissioners to meet with Henry Hilliard, an Alabama

²¹ Senate Journal, 1860-61, 35.

representative sent by Jefferson Davis, for the purpose of drawing up military arrangements with the Confederacy. Two of the commissioners -- Washington Barrow and Gustavas Henry -- were Whigs who had opposed secession up until the firing on Sumter. Their agreement to the necessity of joining the Confederacy symbolized the end of the unionist cause as well as the Whig-Constitutional Union party that was so strongly associated with it. The mood of the Whigs was succinctly expressed in the old party organ the Banner: "We are out of the Union -- entirely and finally..."²²

The June 8 vote on union or separation was not even close (104,471-47,183). Only 31 of Tennessee's 82 counties opposed the measure. 25 of these were in East Tennessee. 31,000 of the state's slaveholders again turned out. This time, faced with a direct choice for secession or no, they chose the former with unanimity.

Token resistance was, of course, most common in the Whig strongholds of East Tennessee. Its members were powerless because the weak link that had sustained their party -- the hope that voters would never be directly confronted with a choice between union and the preservation of slavery -- had snapped. Their only option was to establish a quasi-independent state during the war, led by men such as Johnson and Brownlow, who continued their verbal attacks against the Confederacy well after Tennessee had chosen its fate.

²² Nashville Banner, May 9, 1861.

The vast majority of their middle and western cohorts drifted away into the southern league. Even John Bell, the union candidate of 1860, faltered. Bell, in his trademark non-committal manner, was critical of the legislature's May 6 declaration of independence, which he described as constitutionally questionable. Yet, at the same time, he urged its ratification. Again, Bell was plagued by indecision and self-doubt. Politically, he must have known it was wise to acquiesce, but his ideological devotion to the concept of a unified nation gave him reason to pause. The man who had seen Tennessee through the 1850 Compromise, Kansas-Nebraska, and Lecompton was christened as one of the state's new, reluctant Confederates.

Conclusion

According to the historian Ulrich B. Phillips, "The great central body of southern Whigs were the cotton producers, who were first state-rights men pure and simple and joined the Whigs from a sense of outrage at Jackson's threat of coercing South Carolina." However, when applied to Tennessee Whigs, Phillips's definition leaves something to be desired. Who exactly then, were the Tennessee Whigs and how did the "typical" Whig differ from the "typical" Democrat?

Despite significant research on the subject (i.e. Lowrey's study) substantive answers have yet to be offered. Occupation was no clear indicator of partisan affiliation. Farmer-planters dominated both parties in nearly equal proportions with the more wealthy of this occupation tending to be Democrats, contrary to Phillips's assertion. Merchants, not surprisingly, were more likely to be anti-Democrats given the more "commercial" Whig economic philosophy, but the disparity was not great. In West Tennessee, for the 1855-1860 period, Democratic merchants were actually more prolific within their respective party than their Whig counterparts. The occupations of artisan, doctor, and lawyer were, likewise, unreliable determinants of partisanship.

Other possible factors investigated by Lowrey included age, place of birth, ethnocultural background, and personal property versus real estate. Nowhere is there a definitive dividing line between Whigs and Democrats. Minor tendencies abound, but for every case frequent exceptions can be found.

The voting behavior of particular areas oftentimes defies explanation. The case of Obion County and Cocke County provide a vivid example of how two communities, remarkably similar in numerous aspects, could differ so drastically in how they cast their votes. The 1850 census reported Obion County's white and free-colored population at 6,576 and Cocke County's at 7,581. Both were dominated by small farms of between 20-50 acres (45.8% in Obion and 39.4% in Cocke) and neither contained any farms over 1,000 acres. The slave to slaveowner ratios were also nearly identical. Obion's ratio was 4.6 per owner while Cocke's was 4.9 per owner. Only 6 slaveowners (1.1%) in Obion had 30 or more slaves compared to 2 (1.1%) in Cocke County.

Neither county was a big cotton producer in 1850. Obion County recorded only 55 bales produced and Cocke County registered 3. Obion was a large producer of tobacco however. In 1850 it ranked 19th among Tennessee counties in tobacco grown. Cocke County grew no tobacco and instead relied more heavily on staple crops, especially corn. The annual value of Obion county products was \$155,000 in 1850 placing it 34th in the state. Cocke County was not far behind at 48th with an annual product value of \$97,000.

The similarities ended during elections. Obion County was thoroughly Democratic, often going to that party by over 2:1 margins and increasing as the decade progressed. Obion also had the distinction of being the only county to elect the same General Assembly, B.L. Stovall, to either the House or Senate for

all three elections from 1853-1857, emphasizing the rareness of incumbency on the state level. Cocke County, on the other hand, went consistently Whig by spreads of 3 or 4 to 1. In addition, the county elected 3 different Whigs to the lower house of the General Assembly in the same 1853-1857 period.

The fact that individual voters and communities could share so many physical similarities and yet organize so differently politically is further testimony for the assertion that it was issues and not isolated cliques that motivated people to vote as they did. Partisan affiliation remained a distinctly individual choice because the parties were able to maintain separate identities by disagreeing on nearly all issues of concern, local and national. And once a partisan choice was made Tennesseans remained steadfast in their allegiance, as demonstrated by the voting returns of the antebellum period.

Ideological distinction then, was the key to continuing Whig vitality up until secession. A party did not survive on its own merits, rather it could only continue with the consent and support of voters. Obviously, a large segment of the general public was willing to grant this support to the Whigs as long as party lines remained.

The real wonder was that the Whigs were able to retain at least a semblance of party organization throughout the period. The Whigs never seemed fully trustful of party politics and, as a result, their unity and organization often suffered. No clear leadership structure ever emerged for the masses to rally around.

The Democrats, though by no means highly centralized, were at least better organized than the Whigs. In close elections this probably handicapped the Whigs. In Whig victories it often led to internal dissension.

However in 1859 dissension was the last thing on the minds of most Whigs. The party had survived the worst scares of the 1850's and appeared ready to rebuild the foundation swept away in the aftermath of Kansas-Nebraska. The secession crisis inevitably rendered all speculation about the party's future a moot point.

Secession meant a final decision on the territorial issue the Whigs sought so desperately to avoid. Unfortunately, most Whigs found their party position on the "wrong" side of public opinion. They themselves were then faced with the choice of either acquiescing in secession or maintaining their unionist stance at the cost of political isolation. Regardless of their choice, the fact remained that the Whig party was at last dead.

APPENDIX

Platform of the American Party of Tennessee, 1855¹

We believe that AMERICAN LIBERTY is the richest inheritance ever committed to man, and, in proportion to its value, should be our vigilance and fidelity in its defence. We should guard with a jealous eye every assault upon its integrity, whether proceeding from faction within or interference without. We would regard the slightest diminution of or infringement upon this Liberty as the greatest calamity that could befall the human family. We hold that in its continued and ultimate triumph are involved the progress, the elevation and the happiness of the race. While it is eminently peculiar to Americans, it is yet the strongest bond between them and the remainder of mankind. The present generation of citizens and patriots will best show themselves worthy of this inheritance and of the glory won by their forefathers, by transmitting it both undiminished and unimpaired to their posterity. For the purpose of preserving this possession among ourselves, as far as we can, of securing its safety forever, we pledge ourselves to each other and to the country, to stand by the following declaration of our principles and sentiments:

Resolved, That we esteem it the highest duty of American citizens to promote the permanence and prosperity of their country; and that, with this view, they should defend the principles of American Republicanism proclaimed by our fathers in the Revolution of 1776, and embodied in the Constitution of the United States.

Resolved, That, while no obstacle should be interposed to the immigration of honest and industrious foreigners, we will protest against the United States being made either a penal colony or a pauper establishment for the use of foreign nations; and we will, therefore, advocate the passage of such laws as will prevent the shipment to our shores of all foreign criminals and paupers, and demand of the governments conniving at their shipment immediate and ample satisfaction for the outrage.

Resolved, That the suffrages of the American people for political offices should not be given to any other than those born on our soil, and reared and nurtured under the influence of our institutions.

Resolved, That no foreigner ought to be allowed to exercise the elective franchise till he shall have resided within the United States a sufficient length of time to enable him to become acquainted with the principles and imbued with the spirit of our institutions, and until he shall have become thoroughly identified with the great interests of our country.

Resolved, That we will maintain the vested rights of all persons, whether of native or foreign birth, and will at all times oppose the slightest interference with such rights.

¹Nashville Daily Union and American, June 28, 1855.

APPENDIX

Resolved, That the intelligence and virtue of the people are necessary to the right use and continuance of our liberties, civil and religious; hence the propriety and importance of promoting and fostering all means of moral and intellectual culture by some adequate and permanent provision for general education.

Resolved, That the Bible in the hands of every citizen is the only permanent basis of civil and religious liberty.

Resolved, That we acknowledge the right of all men to worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience; that we will interfere in no wise with private judgment on religious subjects; and that we will oppose all union of Church and State, regardless of whatever sect or party may seek to bring about such union.

Resolved, That we recognize no law higher than the Constitution, and that the assumption of a right by any foreign Prince, Pope or Potentate to interfere with the affairs of our people, is at war with the peculiar liberty which we have justly denominated American.

Resolved, That we will ignore the agitation of all questions, of whatever character, based upon geographical distinctions or sectional interest.

Resolved, That we will support those who maintain our doctrines, and oppose those who oppose our doctrines; and we will use our utmost exertions to build up an "American Party," whose maxim shall be, AMERICANS SHALL GOVERN THEIR COUNTRY.

Platform of the American Party of Tennessee, 1856²

I. Resolved, That we reaffirm and proclaim the platform adopted by the Philadelphia Convention in June last, believing the principles therein set forth, necessary and proper for the best good of the whole country.

II. Resolved, That as regards the question of slavery, experience has shown that it is a subject upon which the American people have always differed. As ardent lovers of the Union, and of the peace and harmony of the country, we deprecate all the agitation of the subject, as the worst foe to the perpetuity of the Republic. Always entertaining the most profound respect and regard for the compromises of the Constitution and laws of the land, and feeling that all of our rights of liberty, religion, and property are amply protected by them in all parts of our common country, as patriots, we will accord to them as we have ever done, a patriot's obedience, asking nothing but what is right, and admitting to nothing that is wrong.

III. Resolved, that we will abide by and maintain the provisions of the Constitution of the United States, and the existing laws

² Brownlow's Knoxville Whig, Feb. 23, 1856.

APPENDIX

of Congress upon the subject as a final settlement thereof; and therefore, we will oppose any and all further agitation upon this question. In making this declaration, we deny that Congress possesses any power to legislate upon the subject of slavery in any way, and we equally deny to the people of the territories any such power until the formation of a state government, opposing the odious doctrine of squatter sovereignty, or in other words, the application by the people of the territories of Wilmot Provisoism.

IV. Resolved, That our delegates to the National Convention, to be held in Philadelphia on the 22nd of February, inst., be instructed to use their influence and procure the repeal of all ceremonial of initiation into the American party, and all obligations of secrecy or otherwise.

V. Resolved, That the education of the youth of our country is the best means of perpetuating its liberties, that the States should provide for that education by establishing common schools throughout their limits, and that the Protestant Bible, as their text book should never be excluded from them.

VI. Resolved, that this Convention, feeling justly indignant at the gross misrepresentations of their principles and motives by their opponents, and the organs and leaders of the opposition, recommend to their friends everywhere, in all future contests to maintain their positions with dignity and firmness, but to tolerate no longer in silence, any unjust war upon their rights as American freemen.

VII. Resolved, that the present administration of the Federal Government by the appointment of ultrasectional men to leading Cabinet and judicial offices -- by its open interference with elections, and by its wholesale proscription of large masses of the American people for no other reason than that their support of the time-honored doctrines of their fathers, has violated every principle which brought it into power. It has been vacillating and insincere, and has forfeited all claim to public confidence, and deserves the condemnation of all conscientious men. The first resolution endorses -- reaffirms and proclaims-- the Philadelphia platform expressly pretermittting any expression of opinion on the power of Congress to establish or abolish slavery in the Territories. Stick a pin there.

Platform of 1857³

Resolved, by this convention that the abuses and ultra-tendencies of the party in power, calling itself the democracy, merit the earnest opposition of every friend of the Union and Constitution.

Resolved, That the best interests of the country, present

³Nashville Patriot, May 2, 1857.

APPENDIX

and prospective require a material modification of the naturalization laws, in order to guard against the evils of foreign influence in the administration of our Government.

Resolved, That we utterly repudiate the doctrine which concedes to aliens the right of suffrage, and places them on an equal footing with the native and naturalized citizens of the United States, and a violation of the Constitution, and its provisions.

Resolved, That all the States of the Union are entitled to participation in the public bounty; and that the policy of the party in power, by which the public lands are appropriated, in large quantities, for the benefit of particular states, is unjust, unequal and injurious to the Old States and ought not to be tolerated.

Resolved, That Tennessee, in her insulated position, heretofore omitted among the favorites of the administration in the distribution of the public lands, with her load of debt, incurred for the development of her resources, has a deep stake in that policy which shall do her justice, and the means of saving her people from taxation.

Resolved, That Congress has power, under the war clause of the Constitution to aid in the construction of the Pacific Railroad and that the extension of aid is highly expedient.

Resolved, That the Federal Union being the only safeguard of American liberty, every true patriot should devote his best energies to its preservation.

Resolved, That the systematic agitation of the slavery question has brought our Union into peril, and it is the duty of every American patriot not to interfere with the institution of other states over which he has no legitimate control.

Resolved, That we are opposed to the interference of the General Government in the settlement of the question of slavery in the Territories, and we believe that the citizens of the United States, bona fide residents in the Territories, have the right to determine the question of slavery, when they come to the adoption of a State Constitution.

APPENDIX

Tennessee: Correlation Coefficients, Whig Voting, 1848-1861*

	<u>1851G</u>	<u>1852P</u>	<u>1855G</u>	<u>1856P</u>	<u>1859G</u>	<u>1860P</u>	<u>1861U</u>	<u>1861C</u>	<u>1861UU</u>
1848P	.82	.79	.79	.78	.68	.75	.36	.29	.22
1851 P		.87	.93	.90	.91	.90	.64	.56	.46
1852P			.87	.90	.87	.90	.53	.37	.22
1855G				.95	.93	.92	.61	.50	.41
1856P					.93	.96	.55	.42	.33
1859G						.96	.70	.55	.43
1860P							.60	.42	.32
1861U								.78	.60
1861C									.77

* Taken from Crofts, Reluctant Confederates, p. 59.

Tennessee: Estimated Distribution of Voters, 1856-1860 (in Percentages)*

<u>1860</u>	<u>1856</u>				<u>Total</u>
	<u>Democrat</u>	<u>American</u>	<u>Nonvoting</u>		
Democrat	39 (38)	-2 (0)	3 (2)		40
Breckinridge	38 (33)	-1 (0)	-3 (1)		34
Douglas	1 (5)	-1 (0)	5 (1)		6
Constitutional Union	2	34	1		37
Nonvoting	0 (2)	5 (3)	17 (18)		23
Total	42	37	21		100

* Crofts, p. 88.

Voting Patterns in High- and Low-Slaveowning Counties in 1860 (in Percentages)*

	<u>Whig (Bell)</u>	<u>Democrat (Breckinridge and Douglas)</u>	<u>Nonvoting</u>
Tennessee: entire state	36.8	40.3	22.9
Tennessee: high-slaveowning	37.8	41.6	20.6
Tennessee: low-slaveowning	36.1	39.4	24.5

*Crofts, p. 46.

APPENDIX

February 1861 Patterns of November 1860 Tennessee Voters (in Percentages)*

Party	Percent of Total	Union	Secession	Not Voting	No Convention	Not Convention	Voting
Whig	36.8	92	03	05	76	19	05
Democratic	40.3	35	38	27	13	60	27
Nonvoting, 1860	22.9	17	00	83	17	00	83

*Crofts, p. 191.

Tennessee: Estimated Percentages of Slaveowners and Nonslaveowners in
Voting Blocs, November 1860, February 1861, and June 1861*

Category	Slaveowners (N=36,844)	Nonslaveowners (N=152,585)
Eligible electorate, 1860 (N=189,429)	19.5	80.5
Whig, 1860 (Bell) (N=69,728)	26	74
Democrat, 1860 (Breckinridge + Douglas) (N=65,097+11,281) (Total N=76,378)	18	82
Nonvoting, 1860 (N=43,323)	13	87
Union, February 1861 (N=99,150)	20	80
Secession, February 1861 (N=30,586)	25	75
Nonvoting (Union versus secession) (N=59,693)	15	85
No convention, February 1861 (N=69,772)	9	91
Convention, February 1861 (N=57,708)	36	64
Nonvoting (convention question) (N=47,183)	15	85
Union, June 1861 (N=47,183)	0	100
Separation, June 1861 (N=104,471)	30	70
Nonvoting (Union versus separation) (N=37,775)	15	85

*Crofts, p. 186