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Confronting democracy: Edward Coles and the cultivation of authority in the young nation

Suzanne Cooper Guasco

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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CONFRONTING DEMOCRACY: EDWARD COLES AND THE CULTIVATION OF AUTHORITY IN THE YOUNG NATION

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Suzanne Cooper Guasco

2004
APPROVAL SHEET

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Suzanne Cooper Guasco

Approved by the Committee, March 2004

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DEDICATION

To Benjamin and Elizabeth Cooper and Margaret and William Duncan, whose interest in history first inspired my curiosity about the past.
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ABSTRACT

Born in 1786, Edward Coles came of age as Americans attempted to define this nation's character. Convinced of his generation's responsibility to ensure the survival of the republican experiment, Coles emerged from the College of William and Mary determined to assume a position of authority. Unlike most of his contemporaries, however, he left Williamsburg persuaded that slavery was morally and ideologically wrong. Burdened by a conflict between a sense of duty to serve his nation and a commitment to eliminate slavery, Coles embarked on a public career that took him from the seat of national power in Washington City, to the rustic frontier of Illinois, and, finally, to the cosmopolitan city of Philadelphia.

Throughout his journey, his antislavery sensibility forced him to redefine his claim to authority. While serving as President James Madison's private secretary, Cole's participated in a national political culture that utilized elite networks to accomplish political business. Although he exercised considerable influence, he remained troubled by the slavery issue and decided to immigrate to the frontier, where he emancipated his enslaved property. To Coles's dismay, Illinois' commitment to freedom proved to be illusory. As he attempted to transform, his environment, he adopted democratic political tactics and, as governor, employed them to defeat a movement to legalize slavery. Those efforts, however, left him disillusioned with public service. Unwilling to accept his role as a displaced frontier elite, Coles moved east and settled in Philadelphia. There, the political crisis of the 1850s drew him back into the public arena. Determined to prevent a sectional crisis, Coles represented himself as the authority on the legacy of the American Revolution. Highlighting his intimate relationship with Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, he attempted to recast the founding generation as antislavery statesmen who would have been outraged by the political developments of the antebellum era. Tragically, his efforts were unsuccessful and the nation plunged into civil war.

Edward Coles was emblematic of a generation of Americans who were alarmed by the democratic changes surrounding them, yet unable to prevent the erosion of elite authority those transformations engendered.
CONFRONTING DEMOCRACY: EDWARD COLES AND THE
CULTIVATION OF AUTHORITY IN THE
YOUNG NATION
INTRODUCTION

"The delicacy of the task . . . imposed": Reconsidering the Life of Edward Coles

In early April 1844, fifty-eight year old Edward Coles sat down at his writing desk in the parlor of his Philadelphia brownstone to respond to a request from an "old & kind . . . friend," who had solicited a narrative of the ex-governor's life prior to his election to office in Illinois in 1822. More specifically, his correspondent asked him to describe "the causes which led me to emancipate my slaves." As he gazed around the room, momentarily pausing when his eye caught the confident jaw line or optimistic stare of one of the four revolutionary portraits that adorned his walls, Coles undoubtedly contemplated the personal and public consequences of accepting the invitation to re-examine his past. He confessed that "the impossibility of answering your enquiries without subjecting myself to the charge of egotism & vanity" caused him to hesitate. Additionally, the request was submitted during a particularly contentious period in the public debate over slavery and he was aware that his response might be used as ammunition in the battle over the westward expansion of the institution. Still, the occasion provided Coles with an unusual opportunity both to define his legacy and present his experiences as a model for others to emulate. Enticed by the chance to self-consciously craft a "history . . . of myself," he agreed to compose the requested narrative, but asked his audience "not [to] lose sight of
the delicacy of the task... imposed” upon him.1

Coles’s decision to respond to his friend’s inquiry and the penning of the narrative
was an inherently self-reflective activity, an occasion when he made choices as he recalled
the story of his life. As he considered which events and individuals to include or exclude
from his autobiography, Coles pieced together a generally logical and coherent narrative
that was really more a construction than a truth; for the very act of inclusion and exclusion
distorted the tale. According to Coles, he was a man of genteel background who had
concluded, in accordance with classical republican ideas of freedom and independence,
that the enslavement of other human beings was morally and ideologically wrong. Such a
conclusion, as Coles testified, had led him to sacrifice his own personal interest, a life as a
Virginia gentleman and the inherited wealth and status it engendered, in favor of the
common good, a life dedicated to the creation of a harmonious republican society without
slavery. Additionally, he hoped his audience would understand the persecution he and the
enslaved laborers he liberated endured as a result of his selfless act. While he may not
have created a completely accurate representation of his life, Coles intended his effort at
self-construction, his relative account of his life, to define his legacy. More than anything
else, he wanted posterity to remember him as both an idealistic and benevolent Virginian
who emancipated his enslaved property despite considerable opposition and someone who
had attempted to realize the republican vision for the nation first espoused by the

1Edward Coles, “Autobiography,” April 1844, Edward Coles Collection, Historical Society of
Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP). For a recent treatment of the debate over slavery and westward expansion,
see Michael A. Morrison, Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the
Coming of the Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). The following portraits
adorned Coles’s parlor walls: George Washington by Gilbert Stuart’s daughter; Thomas Jefferson and
James Madison by the artist himself; and James Monroe by Vanderlyn.
Most historians who have investigated Edward Coles have followed their subject’s lead and focused their studies on his antislavery activities. After establishing his Virginia gentry heritage, identifying his tenure at the College of William and Mary as the source of his antislavery convictions, and describing his relationship with both James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, scholars have shifted their focus to Coles’s career in the Old Northwest, where he emancipated his enslaved laborers, was elected governor, and played an instrumental role in preventing Illinois from becoming a slaveholding state. Coles was most proud of these details of his life, events he believed sustained his reputation as a benevolent man of sensibility, a gentleman committed to privileging the public good above his own private interest.

Coles would have been disappointed to learn, however, that these scholars have judged him harshly for failing to inspire others to follow his example. While they have universally celebrated his antislavery convictions and acknowledged that his career on the frontier exhibited some moments of glory, most historians have concluded that Coles’s life was more disappointing than inspiring. Robert M. Sutton, the most recent scholar to focus exclusively on his role in the 1824 Illinois convention crisis, argues that Coles’s years in Illinois exhibited “a curious mixture of sunlight and shadow - of success and failure, with the failures seeming to clearly outweigh the successes.” Similarly, Kurt E.

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Leichtle, the only modern historian to offer a manuscript-length study of the Virginian, declares that Coles was “a man who appeared to have the opportunities to do extraordinary things and to champion great causes, but who through human frailty missed most of the opportunities.” Focused on assessing the importance of Coles’s antislavery actions, these historians generally conclude that he failed to make a significant impact on the world around him.\(^3\)

Even in works that explore other subjects, Edward Coles is often portrayed as a misguided idealist or a passionate partisan whose late-eighteenth-century republican world-view led him to misunderstand his contemporaries. James Simeone, who presents the Illinois convention struggle of 1822-1824 as a catalyst for the region’s political transformation, argues that Coles was an Eastern elitist who failed to recognize the class-based resentment his abstract antislavery ideals and gentry heritage provoked. Although he acknowledges that “Coles’s role as a counter-point to the legislature” during the

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convention crisis was “important,” Simeone credits other factors, such as the transition to statehood, Panic of 1819, and, most importantly, growing resentment against elites with precipitating the democratic revolution that unfolded during the convention contest. In his study of James Madison during his retirement years, Drew McCoy represents Coles as one of several disciples who misconstrued the fourth president’s legacy. From his perspective, Coles was politically naive and inappropriately allowed his extreme hatred of Andrew Jackson to distort his understanding of the political turmoil of the mid-1830s. According to McCoy, whether he encouraged Madison to condemn Jackson’s administration publicly or insisted that he emancipate his chattel property, Coles maintained a vision of his mentor and an understanding of how his authority should be deployed that was completely at odds with Madison’s own intentions.4

While the image of Edward Coles generated by these works is not without merit, this study suggests that Coles was neither as unimportant nor as naive as some scholars would have it. Certainly, he never held national office, composed a piece of groundbreaking legislation, or initiated any broad transformations during his lifetime. Yet, Coles did follow through with his convictions when he emancipated his enslaved laborers, served as governor of Illinois, and was primarily responsible for preventing the Frontier State from legalizing slavery. All of these events make him, if not significant, then at the very

least, a remarkable individual. Accordingly, this study does not ignore Coles's antislavery convictions and their consequences, but, instead, defines his antislavery ideals as one aspect of his more general effort to maintain his identity as a gentleman worthy of respect and deference.

When considered in its entirety, Coles's life exposes the struggles many elites endured as they attempted to retain their claim to authority and public influence in a rapidly democratizing society. Although he transformed himself from a Southern patrician slaveholder into a Western antislavery politician, and finally, into an Eastern urban capitalist, Coles never fully embraced the liberal ethos of self-interest that allowed anyone who mastered the skills of public performance to exercise social and political influence. Instead, he clung to an eighteenth-century world view that rewarded men of talent and virtue, a republican caste of natural aristocrats, who dedicated themselves to the service of the common good. Consequently, as he confronted the democratic changes that emerged in American society during the first half of the nineteenth century, Coles attempted to preserve his claim to authority by constantly publicizing and displaying his allegiance to the nation's revolutionary heritage. More than anything, Edward Coles believed that only the leadership of gentlemen of republican sensibility, individuals who possessed the proper

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education, experience, and habits of civility, would ensure the survival of the republican experiment.

Historians have spent a great deal of energy explaining how American society changed after the American Revolution. They have painstakingly documented and debated the emergence of a democratic society that offered unparalleled economic, social, and political opportunities to the vast majority of its citizens even as it consciously excluded particular groups from the benefits of those transformations. Authors as diverse as Joyce Appleby, Gordon S. Wood, Joseph J. Ellis and John Murrin have agreed that the authority of a post-revolutionary ruling class gradually eroded as it confronted the demographic, economic, and political expansion that shaped the first half of the nineteenth century. Similarly, a number of historians have also explored the cultural ramifications of the democratization of American society, focusing their studies on the emergence of a

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middle class mentality and the resulting transformation of American gentility. Generally, the transitions they describe appear to have occurred almost inevitably and relatively smoothly. Few of these scholars, then, have investigated how America’s increasingly marginalized post-revolutionary elites responded to and attempted to thwart the emerging “assault on aristocracy.” This study seeks to resolve this scholarly oversight by exploring the life of Edward Coles, a man who was representative of a generation of elites who, as they confronted the rapidly changing character of the world they inhabited, attempted to reformulate their claim to authority and prestige by modifying, yet retaining the essential characteristics of, a genteel culture of enlightened republican sensibility.

Born on December 15, 1786 in Albemarle County, Virginia, Edward Coles came of age in a world that bestowed authority on individuals who possessed the wealth, social

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connections and education of a natural aristocracy. This was particularly true in the Old
Dominion, but also in the South generally, where a small group of slaveholding elites, a
gentry class, dominated society into the early nineteenth century. His father, Colonel
John Coles, was one of the wealthiest men in Albemarle County, accumulating nearly
14,500 acres of land and over seventy slaves by his death in 1808. As a demonstration of
his wealth and standing, the elder Coles constructed an impressive plantation home, called
Enniscorthy, on Green Mountain, as well as several other mansions in the region. Situated
just three miles outside of Charlottesville, the Coles family estate shared the Virginia
Piedmont with several other now famous estates, Monticello and Ashland, the homes of
Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe respectively. Indeed, both of these prominent
national statesmen frequently visited Enniscorthy, where they socialized and discussed
farming and politics with the Coles family.

Although he never held an elected office, John Coles served as a colonel in the
county militia and was a member of the church vestry, both of which marked him as a
member of Virginia’s ruling elite. Additionally, the Coles patriarch maintained a genteel
lifestyle, purchasing refined clothing for himself and his family and luxury items for his

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10Ryse Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790 (Chapel Hill: University of North
Carolina Press, 1982); Allan Kulikoff, Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the
Chesapeake, 1680-1800 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); James Sydnor, Virginia
Gentlemen...

11Elizabeth Langhorne, K. Edward Lay, and William D. Rieley, A Virginia Family and Its
Plantation Houses (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 11-37. See also William B.
Coles, The Coles Family of Virginia and Its Numerous Connections, From the Emigration to America to
the Year 1915 (New York, 1931). Coles constructed several mansions for his children: Woodville for
Walter between 1794 and 1796, Redlands for Mary Eliza (Polly) in 1798, Calyianthus Hill for John in
1799, and Tallwood for Tucker in 1804.
household. He and his family also regularly attended local balls, dinner parties, and horse races, vacationed at mountain springs, and journeyed into Richmond where they cultivated the manners and deportment necessary to display their status before the public. It was during these social occasions that the Southern elite established the social and kinship connections that formed them into a gentry class. For the Coles family, socializing in the Old Dominion's polite society produced kinship connections with several first families of Virginia, the Skipwiths, Tuckers, Madisons and Carters among them.12

The elder Coles intended to ensure that his children inherited the status and authority he enjoyed by providing his sons with the wealth and educational opportunities characteristic of the family's gentry heritage. Walter and John, his two eldest sons, inherited land, bound laborers, cattle, sheep, and horses. Isaac received the family seat, but was not to take over ownership until the death of his mother, Rebecca Tucker Coles. Like his brothers, Tucker also received land, livestock, and chattel property when his father died in 1808. Each of the daughters received cash, often as much as one thousand pounds, as well as enslaved laborers and furniture. Additionally, the older children were charged with the responsibility of raising fortunes for the youngest daughters and ensuring that all of the remaining children below a majority received a proper education. Even though he was the fifth of five sons in a family of ten children, Edward inherited a seven hundred and forty-two acre plantation and over twenty bound laborers, enough property


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to maintain the lifestyle of a Southern gentleman farmer. Edward Coles, then, was born with all the prerequisites – genteel habits, prominent social connections, and wealth – for the exercise of public authority. Consequently, he expected to wield considerable influence when he reached a majority.  

As was the custom among the Virginia gentry, Colonel John Coles also provided for the formal education of his sons. Like his older brothers, Edward Coles was initially tutored at home and at nearby plantations, but received a more formal education first at Hampden Sidney College and then at the College of William and Mary. While in Williamsburg he encountered an educational program designed to sustain his gentry status and prepare him for a future career in public life. To that end, the college administration offered a formal curriculum that emphasized politics and moral philosophy. Significantly, students at the College of William and Mary read some of the more radical political theorists and moral philosophers of the Scottish Common Sense School, ensuring that most of them would emerge from the college armed with a particularly Jeffersonian Republican political perspective. Students also pursued an informal curriculum offered by the elite social circles of Williamsburg, where they were expected to master the art of speech, manners, decorum and civility. Together, the formal and informal components of his college education were designed to transform Coles and his fellow-collegians into enlightened men of learning and sensibility, men with the intellectual and cultural background necessary to assume positions of public authority.

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For Coles, the liberal education he encountered at the College of William and Mary also had an unintended consequence. Like his fellow-collegians, he developed a commitment to the basic tenets of natural rights ideology and championed the superiority of the republican form of government. Not surprisingly, he often espoused a strong allegiance to the political views and actions of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, both of whom he knew intimately as a result of family connections. As he attended elaborate balls, formal dinners, and public celebrations in the old colonial capital, he also learned the importance of developing a refined sense of sociability. But, unlike most of his fellow-students, Coles’s exposure to the political and social theorists who inspired the American Revolution led him to develop the conviction that slavery was morally and ideologically wrong. When he left Williamsburg, then, he was troubled by an increasingly strong tension between his commitment to pursue a public career that would ensure the survival of the republican experiment, the particular obligation of his generation, and his heart-felt opposition to the institution of slavery, a conflict that would shape the decisions he would make for the remainder of his life.

When he returned to his family’s rural plantation in the summer of 1807, Coles remained uncertain what career he should pursue. He knew his opposition to slavery precluded a future as a planter. The death of his father in 1808 forced him to make a decision, and he chose to survey the region north of the Ohio River where he hoped to purchase land, liberate his enslaved inheritance, and settle down. Before he could act on his decision, Coles received a letter from President James Madison requesting that he serve as his private secretary. At first glance, the public post seemed to offer Coles the
chance to fulfill his generational responsibility to contribute to the preservation of the republican experiment, but his anxiety to follow through with his convictions led him to decline the offer. A fortuitous encounter with James Monroe, however, caused him to reconsider his decision and, after earnest reflection, he accepted the President’s offer and moved to the nation’s capital in the winter of 1810.

While in Washington City, Coles came to understand how the abstract political ideas and social importance of his habits of civility could be employed to accomplish practical political goals. As he performed his day-to-day responsibilities as a presidential secretary, he refined his political skills and became particularly adept at manipulating social situations to achieve public business, for it was during the Madison administration’s weekly dinner parties, Wednesday drawing rooms, and executive levees that the President attempted to shape and define national policy. Even more importantly, as he traveled up and down the Atlantic seaboard and abroad, Coles discovered that the politically potent culture of sociability that regulated exchanges in the nation’s capital knew no sectional or national boundaries. Instead, civility and politics were intimately intertwined and formed the foundation of a national, indeed international, political culture. More than anything, Coles’s official duties as a member of the Presidential family enhanced his public authority and allowed him to satisfy his sense of obligation to serve the national interest.

Yet, as had been the case when he first returned to Enniscorthy after college, Coles continued to feel torn between his desire to be counted among the nation’s political elite and enjoy the cosmopolitan society that accompanied public service and his moral duty to follow through with his conviction to liberate his chattel property. Ultimately, his tenure
in Washington City and his diplomatic tour abroad reinvigorated his determination to emancipate his enslaved laborers, for throughout his national political career he could not escape the institution of slavery. Washington City contained a sizable enslaved population and the President employed enslaved laborers in his home. Most significantly, the threat of slave rebellion during the War of 1812 confirmed Coles’s suspicion that a Republic that allowed slavery to persist would eventually perish. As he traveled through Russia, continental Europe, and Great Britain, countries he recognized as more autocratic but less tolerant of slavery than America, his experiences only sustained such a conclusion. When he returned from his trip abroad in the fall of 1817, Coles was more determined than ever before to exchange his newly cultivated sense of public authority in Washington City for a new, yet uncertain, life on the frontier.

Coles immigrated to the Old Northwest with the expectation that Illinois would be a free and prosperous state. He had visited the region on two earlier occasions and his last trip in 1818, when he attended Illinois’s constitutional convention, led him to believe that his assumptions were well-founded. It was also during his 1818 tour of the Prairie State that he discovered a vacancy in the Land Office at Edwardsville. After soliciting the position for himself, he received the appointment. Consequently, not only did he anticipate settling in a region free of slavery and hospitable to free blacks when he left Albemarle County in the spring of 1819, but he also hoped his federal appointment, when combined with his land investments, would help him recover the financial losses imposed by his benevolent act of emancipation.

As he had anticipated, Illinois, and Edwardsville in particular, lacked the
cosmopolitan society he had experienced in Washington City and abroad. Additionally, as he had hoped, Coles was immediately recognized as a member of the region’s ruling elite, men who possessed the wealth, political connections, and formal education of a natural aristocracy. As Register of the Land Office at Edwardsville, he hoped to aid these men as they exercised their considerable public authority to improve Illinois’s underdeveloped economic and social environment. Coles discovered soon after his arrival, however, that Illinois was entering an economic recession, boasted a population that was unreceptive to black freedom, and contained a very visible enslaved population. Perhaps most disturbing of all, he learned that a significant number of the state’s ruling elite intended to orchestrate a campaign to legalize slavery. Together, these conditions led Coles to pursue political office, a position from which he intended to apply the skills he refined in Washington City and wield his public authority to transform Illinois into the free and economically prosperous society he expected it to be.

All of Coles’s previous experiences had prepared him to succeed in his pursuit of the governorship in 1822. As a student at the College of William and Mary, he had been trained to assume a position of public authority in the new nation. Not only did he possess the abstract political knowledge necessary to understand the workings of a republican form of government, but he had also acquired the social skills, the habits of civility, that were necessary to wield his authority effectively. During his tenure in Washington City, Coles had refined his political skills by observing Madison practice the art of politics and by contributing to the Madison administration’s efforts to forge a national political culture that utilized sociability to sustain the Republican vision for the nation’s future. Coles,
then, seemed ideally suited to assume public office and well-trained to accomplish his goal of transforming the Prairie State into a free and independent republican society.

Just as he had failed to realize the true character of Illinois society prior to his settlement in the region, however, so too did he misunderstand the political transformations occurring on the frontier throughout the 1820s. Traditionally, deference toward elites, like Edward Coles, whose wealth and social connections designated them as leaders, dictated voter behavior in local elections. During the Missouri Controversy, however, Illinoisans gradually discarded their deferential habits and began evaluating candidates according to their position on the slavery issue. Despite these changes, some old-style political habits persisted. Some voters who expressed concern for the slavery issue, for example, continued to elect men they recognized as local ruling elites. The region's transformation into a democratic political culture, then, was incomplete, but impossible to ignore, when Coles sought the governorship.

Coles attempted to take advantage of the confluence of both deferential and participant political habits by displaying and publicizing aspects of his character and experience that would be attractive to voters regardless of their electoral tendencies. On the one hand, he emphasized his genteel background, wealth, and status, characteristics that he believed qualified him for office. On the other hand, he identified himself with the most important political issue of the day, slavery, by confessing his antislavery convictions. To his dismay, this strategy provoked as much opposition as support for his candidacy. To counteract the increasingly persistent charges of self-interest and ambition, Coles combined the political lessons he had absorbed while in Washington City with the more
popular political practices of the frontier by campaigning vigorously, touring the state, visiting taverns, conversing with humble and well-to-do residents alike, and publishing letters in the press. While he was ultimately successful, Coles's victory by a mere plurality revealed the extent of the political changes occurring in the state. Still, Coles remained undiscouraged and emerged from the campaign more determined than ever before to prevent the region's proslavery minority from achieving their goal.

Confident that the majority of the state's residents would oppose the legalization of slavery, Coles used his first public address as governor to instruct the legislature to abolish slavery, an event that precipitated a statewide political crisis. The resulting convention contest presented Illinoisans with a choice between a democratic social order populated by free and independent citizens and an aristocratic society based on enslaved labor. More than anything, the convention contest provided the voters with an unprecedented opportunity to shape the political culture of the region.

As governor of the state and a known opponent of slavery, Edward Coles was the most visible leader of the anti-convention cause and played an instrumental role in facilitating the democratization of the region's political culture. He composed essays, collected and distributed pamphlets, solicited the aid of other prominent antislavery residents, and contributed his entire salary to the crusade to prevent the legalization of slavery. His faith in popular sovereignty, a commitment he developed while a student in Williamsburg, led him to conclude that the choice between slavery and freedom should lie in the hands of the people and not be consigned to a small group of self-interested elites. When they rejected the call for a convention and slavery in August 1824, Coles's political
gamble succeeded and he emerged from the contest praised as the man who prevented Illinois from becoming a slave state.

Coles's confrontation with democracy, however, proved more disheartening than inspiring, for the convention contest victory failed to transform Illinois into the free republican society he hoped it would become. To be sure, his efforts prevented Illinois from becoming a slave state in the legal sense, but slavery persisted under the veil of indentured servitude well into the 1850s. Additionally, he recognized that his hard-won triumph only came once the anti-convention forces successfully manipulated the strong anti-black prejudices of the region's Southern-born poor farming majority. Together, these conditions led Coles to conclude that the only way emancipation would preserve the revolutionary generation's republican experiment was if it was gradual and coupled with a colonization program. Perhaps most importantly, the integral role Coles played in the convention contest failed to translate into increased public authority. On the contrary, his refusal to embrace the democratic changes he helped to create led to an embarrassing defeat in a contest for a seat in the House of Representatives. Coles, then, left Illinois in 1832 disillusioned by the democratic transformations he witnessed, changes that perpetuated slavery, anti-black prejudice, and dismissed the wisdom and guidance of gentlemen of enlightened sensibility.

Throughout his residence in Illinois, Coles frequently returned east of the Appalachian Mountains to visit family and friends in Virginia, Washington City, and Philadelphia. Even as early as 1819, he had contemplated abandoning his western plans for a life in the more cosmopolitan environment offered by the City of Brotherly Love.
Consequently, it was hardly surprising that he married Sally Logan Roberts, a young woman twenty-three years his junior from one of the most prominent families in Philadelphia. When they settled into their new home on Chestnut Street in the city’s fashionable district, Coles and his new bride immediately joined an urban aristocratic leisure class that celebrated the virtues of civility, sociability, and political conservatism, elements that must have seemed very comforting to Coles after a career on the rural frontier. Relying on the revenues produced by his investments in western land and railroad and bank stock, Coles and his family enjoyed the cosmopolitan character of city life, an experience that was infrequently disrupted by public political issues and within which Coles exercised considerable social influence.

The political crisis of the 1850s, however, drew Coles out of the pleasant isolation of his family life and beyond the exclusive social circles of Philadelphia. As he observed the debate over the westward expansion of slavery and the development of increasingly antagonistic sectional perspectives on the issue, Coles concluded that the nation required the leadership and guidance of enlightened gentlemen of sensibility more than ever before. In an effort to ensure the preservation of the Union, Coles redefined himself as the authority on Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and the appropriate meaning of the republican legacy. To that end, he recast both men, and the founding generation generally, as antislavery statesmen, politicians who firmly believed that slavery was adverse to the health of the nation, but which could only be eliminated through a moderate program that combined gradual emancipation and colonization. Unfortunately for Coles, the public authority of the nation’s urban elite had become increasingly marginalized over the course
of the nineteenth century. Consequently, his efforts fell on deaf ears and the Republic he so cherished and hoped to preserve erupted into civil war. Although he lived to witnessed the return to peace and the destruction of slavery, Coles died in July 1868 disappointed in the type of nation America had become, for he was a man whose eighteenth-century world-view was dramatically out of step with the world he inhabited.

Like many of his contemporaries, Edward Coles's commitment to democratic social and political ideals, as well as his desire to manage the application of those beliefs in a way that protected the republican experiment from self-destruction, defined the character of his life experiences. By moving beyond a limited focus on his antislavery beliefs and actions to investigate the larger narrative of his life and understanding him within the context of a nationwide battle over authority, it becomes clear that Edward Coles was emblematic of a group of Americans who did not necessarily embrace the democratizing repercussions of the American Revolution. Instead, like Coles, many elites continually struggled to maintain their claim to authority amidst political changes that undermined the social assumptions upon which their power and prestige were based. As he confronted the democratic changes around him, Edward Coles attempted to reformulate his claim to influence by transforming himself from a Southern slaveholding gentleman into an antislavery frontier politician, and, finally, into a guardian of the republican legacy. If they demonstrate nothing else, his experiences serve as a testimony to the constant struggle over the reconfiguration of authority that Americans endured between the American Revolution and the Civil War.
CHAPTER 1

"The advantages of improvement": The College of William and Mary and the Cultivation of Enlightened Sensibility

In the winter of 1805, a young Virginian rode his horse down Duke of Gloucester Street and viewed the remnants of a once vibrant capital. Williamsburg’s residents remained closed inside the many buildings that lined the main thoroughfare, protected from the December weather. At first glance, the bare trees, empty streets, and overcast sky presented a portrait of dreary isolation. Thus, although excited to broaden his education by attending the College of William and Mary, nineteen-year-old Edward Coles arrived in the town only to become “disappointed in the idea that I formed of Williamsburg.” Additionally, he concluded that “the advantages of improvement” seemed wanting at the college where “books are uncommonly dear” and “they have no library worth any thing.” After settling into equally dreary accommodations, Coles could only lament to his father in a letter that “I see nothing very prepossessing either in the town or College.”

Coles was not alone in his assessment of Williamsburg and the College of William and Mary. Joseph Carrington Cabell, a student at the school in 1798, believed that “poor

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1Edward Coles to John Coles, December 6, 1805, Edward Coles Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP).
Williamsburg which was once regarded as the Asylum of Science, must [now] be an object of secondary consideration." Like Coles, Cabell traveled from the Virginia interior in search of an education as well as a cosmopolitan society only to be disappointed. William T. Barry, who studied law at the college a year before Coles's arrival, came to Williamsburg from Richmond, the political and social center of the state since 1780. He wandered the streets of the town "experiencing the most gloomy sensations" as he viewed "many of the houses [that] have tumbled down... [and] the vestiges of departed grandeur." From the perspective of many aspiring young gentlemen, Williamsburg and the college appeared "gloomy and melancholy" and "on the decline."

Edward Coles and his fellow collegians expressed such disappointment because they arrived in Williamsburg with the expectation that their tenure at the College of William and Mary would be the final step in their transition from dependent youths to independent men. During this interim stage when they were physically away from the authority of their fathers, yet still protected from the dangers of the outside world by the in loco parentis supervision of the college administrators and faculty, students strove to transform themselves into men of knowledge and literature, accomplishments that would buttress their claim to authority as the nation's next generation of public leaders. As one

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2Joseph C. Cabell to David Watson, March 4, 1798, Joseph Carrington Cabell Papers, Manuscript and Rare Book Department, Swem Library, College of William and Mary (hereafter SLWM); William T. Barry to Brother, February 15, 1804, "Letters of William T. Barry," *William and Mary Quarterly* 1\* Ser. 8 (July 1904), 112-13 (hereafter *WMQ*). See also Thomas L. Preston to Andrew Reid, Jr., January 7, 1802, "Glimpses of Old College Life," *WMQ* 1\* Ser. 8 (April 1900), 216. Preston wrote that "[m]y expectations of this place were too much raised, and as is common with the sanguine, I was of course disappointed." Garret Minor to David Watson, April 28, 1798, "Letters from William and Mary, 1795-1799," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 30 (July 1922), 245 (hereafter *VMHB*). Minor wrote "I have entertained the opinion for some time past that this college is going down hill."
father informed his college-bound son, "This . . . is the golden period for improvement, the succeeding four years will be the most important to you, in the course of your whole life." He informed him that it was during these years that he would "form [his] character - [the] habits of industry & study . . . which . . . last you forever." This revolutionary father warned, however, that if his son neglected his duty, he would "fall into idleness which begets sloth, that engenders dissipation & finally all energy of thought, of character & of respectability is forever gone." Like the youthful nation, America's young men were perched, precariously, on a precipice. A wrong step in any direction risked a rapid descent from which it was impossible to recover.

Accordingly, Coles and his contemporaries turned to the College of William and Mary to acquire "the foundation on which [their] future prospects thro life depended," a liberal education that included languages, poetry, history and moral philosophy. After all, as early as 1785 Thomas Jefferson had asked, "What are the objects of an useful American Education? Classical Knowledge, modern languages, . . . mathematics, natural philosophy, natural history, civil history, and ethics," he replied. Later that same year, Jefferson boasted to Englishman Richard Price that "the college of William and Mary in Williamsburg," provided just such an education and "is the place where are collected together all the young men of Virginia under preparation for public life." Jefferson could be so confident because Bishop James Madison, the president of the college since 1778,

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had assured him that "the best supporters of our Republic will go forth from our University." The goal remained the same twenty years later, when Coles arrived in Williamsburg. Samuel Mark, a classmate of Coles’s, maintained that a college education should "inspire a love of virtue and a desire for literary celebrity." By immersing themselves in the study of belles lettres, then, Virginia’s young men hoped to emerge from their college experience prepared to assume their proper place among the nation’s civic leadership. The declining condition of the community they encountered, however, led many students to doubt the probability of achieving such a goal.4

Throughout the post-revolutionary era, many of the nation’s prominent men likewise believed that the purpose of higher education was to train and produce the next generation of civic leaders, young men who possessed enough wisdom, courage, and virtue to ensure that the republican experiment would become permanent. As Noah Webster proclaimed in 1790, a republican system of education “should . . . not only diffuse knowledge of the sciences, but may implant in the minds of the American youth the principles of virtue and liberty and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government.” Some fathers echoed this sentiment, but emphasized the rising generation’s responsibility to live up to the reputation of their predecessors and to fulfil the duty uniquely charged to them. “Recollect,” Thomas Todd reminded his son in 1808, that “the honor, the character & reputation of your Country for talent & Genius is in some measure resting on you.”

instructed his son not to waste the opportunity provided by attending the College of William and Mary, for “pride, ambition, nay duty, demands of you an education.” Neither the generation that fought the Revolution nor the one these young men would produce shouldered such a burden. As the first generation of Americans to inherit the ideals of the American Revolution, the first generation charged with the responsibility of ensuring the survival of the Republic, Coles and his contemporaries were constantly reminded of their obligation to acquire and implement a broad, liberal education upon which the very survival of the nation depended.²

Like most of his contemporaries, Edward Coles attended the College of William and Mary intending to acquire an education that would simultaneously sustain his gentry status and prepare him for a future career in public life. While in Williamsburg, he pursued a liberal education that emphasized politics and moral philosophy, a course of study that also reflected the particular political loyalties of the college’s decidedly Republican president. Consequently, along with most of his fellow collegians, Coles imbibed natural rights ideology and celebrated the superiority of the republican form of government. Not coincidently, he also developed a strong allegiance to the Republican party and the two men, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, who led it.

During his tenure in Williamsburg, Coles also learned of the importance of cultivating a refined sense of sociability. It was in the social arenas provided by

Williamsburg and the college that Coles and his classmates contributed to the construction of a community-generated standard of moral taste. As he encountered some of the political and social theorists who inspired the American Revolution and deeply influenced the type of society that emerged during the post-revolutionary era, Coles transformed himself into an enlightened man of sensibility. Unlike most of his fellow-collegians, however, Coles’s exposure to ideas about freedom and equality, when combined with directions to nurture an appropriate moral sense, prompted him to develop a deeply-held conviction that slavery was morally and ideologically wrong. More than anything else, his time at the College of William and Mary, then, led Coles to experience a tension between a heart-felt duty to oppose slavery and a strong desire to claim and maintain his membership among a national class of political leaders who distinguished themselves by displaying their enlightened sensibility and habits of civility, a conflict that would shape the decisions he would make for the rest of his life.

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Edward Coles entered the College of William and Mary as a member of the junior class, having completed the first two years of his formal education at Hampden Sidney College. By the close of his first year in Williamsburg, his critical description of the school was replaced by a confident determination to “derive some practical knowledge” from his tenure in the second oldest college in the nation. As the youngest of five sons and fifth of ten children, Coles felt a sense of urgency to prepare himself to pursue any career other than a planter. Additionally, the economic dislocations occasioned by the Revolutionary War and persistent, and even increasing, tensions with Great Britain seemed to preclude
the possibility of a prosperous life on a small plantation. Instead, Coles knew that he would have to look elsewhere, most likely toward a career in public life, to find an occupation that would ensure his usefulness to society and allow him to maintain the genteel lifestyle he enjoyed. Thomas Jefferson’s alma matter seemed as likely a place as any to accomplish his goal.  

All of the new nation’s colleges offered a curriculum to inculcate the enlightenment ideas that had inspired the American Revolution and steadfastly maintained their commitment to train the next generation of public leaders. To that end, nearly every post-revolutionary college required its students to pursue a liberal education that included courses in classical history, modern languages, mathematics, law and civics, chemistry, physics, and natural and moral philosophy. Offered during the junior and senior years and taught by the college president, the moral philosophy course exercised the most influence over the political and social views of the students and defined the political reputation of the institutions. Bishop Madison and the rest of the nation’s college presidents divided their moral philosophy courses into three sections, which included ethics, the relationship between man and his god, family and friends, and the nature of government. In the latter,

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Madison adopted the common practice of identifying, defining and discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the various forms of government, particularly monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. Inevitably, Madison and his counterparts highlighted the particular advantages of the republican form, emphasizing that sovereignty resided with the people, most particularly property holders, who entrusted their elected officials to enact policies that promoted the common good. But, whereas every other post-revolutionary college president emphasized the dangers of excessive democracy, generally criticized the radical nature of the French Revolution, and praised the increasingly consolidated authority of the Federalist administrations of Washington and Adams, Madison publicly expressed opinions and assigned readings that encouraged the students at the College of William and Mary to develop a particularly pro-French and Jeffersonian Republican political faith.⁷

Under Bishop James Madison’s leadership, Coles and his “Brother collegians” became ardent Jeffersonian Republicans espousing a political vision that celebrated popular sovereignty and looked upon a strong centralized government with skepticism. As at other post-revolutionary colleges, they received a substantial dose of the commonwealth canon, digesting such authorities as Emmerich von Vattel, Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, John Locke and Charles Louis, Baron Montesquieu.⁸ Together, these

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authors provided a particularly skeptical assessment of human nature and proposed the governmental and institutional structure necessary to delay or avert the seemingly inevitable decline of society.

According to Whig theory, human nature was balanced precariously between good and evil, and freedom was always in danger of corruption. From the Whig perspective, the growth of wealth, luxury, and vice were the main sources and symbols of corruption. Public virtue, however, provided the most powerful defense against corruption and tyranny and could only be achieved in an environment characterized by a freedom of conscience. A balanced government, based on a social contract, they claimed, promoted freedom and stabilized society by cultivating public virtue. Many of these authors also radically declared that the right of revolution could be employed as the last safeguard against the corruption posed by excessive bureaucracy, standing armies, and established churches. As they studied and recited some of the most prominent enlightenment authors, Coles and his fellow students became familiar with the ideas colonists employed to justify the decision to sever ties with Great Britain, used to defend the superiority of a republican form of government, and to maintain public virtue as the cornerstone of republican society. Perhaps more importantly, however, they were armed with the theoretical

W. Norton & Company, 1980). The works by these authors included Vattel, Law of Nations (1758), Burlamaqui, Principles of Natural and Political Law (1763), Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690) and Two Treatises on Government (1690), Montesquieu, Rise and Fall of the Romans (1734) and The Spirit of the Laws (1750). For a useful study of the Enlightenment works in American libraries, see David Lundberg and Henry F. May, “The Enlightened Reader in America,” American Quarterly 28 (Summer 1976), 262-93.
background to criticize the emerging Federalist vision for the Republic.

Coles and his fellow students absorbed Bishop Madison's political perspective largely because it directly influenced his presentation of the standard political authorities he assigned in his moral philosophy course. Whereas Yale, Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia assigned texts from the commonwealth tradition and taught them from a conservative political perspective, Madison applied a more liberal emphasis to the works common to all the schools and supplemented the standard readings with other more optimistic and potentially radical Enlightenment authors. Nearly every school, for example, assigned Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, and Madison, as one student observed, "extols and recommends him continually." Many instructors used Smith's text because he argued that the pre-revolutionary economic relationship between Great Britain and the colonies was detrimental to the prosperity of America. Smith also celebrated the republican form of government, believing that its design best protected private property and ensured the prosperity of society. These ideas and arguments explained why colonists pursued independence, supported the decision to call a constitutional convention, and approved of the Constitution.

Yet, Smith's work also contained an aggressive critique of the British economic system. From his perspective the best economic policy left the individual unimpaired. Additionally, Smith was skeptical of the utility of the corporation and the influence and power of financiers. Bishop Madison and other Republicans repeatedly used these

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elements of Smith to criticize a government that attempted to follow the mercantilist model, arguably the ultimate goal of Alexander Hamilton’s fiscal programs during the 1790s. In Madison’s hands, then, Smith was used not only to support the Constitution, but also to expose the potential evils displayed by the Federalist administrations of Washington and Adams.¹⁰

Similarly, while Timothy Dwight and Joseph Willard, presidents of Yale and Harvard respectively, assigned William Paley’s Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy because of its warning against the excesses of democracy, the author’s defense of the unequal distribution of property, and his support for a strong tie between the church and state, Madison emphasized the portions of Paley that favored utilitarianism. He then augmented Paley, and countered his conservative tendencies, by assigning authors who celebrated democracy and popular sovereignty, writers such as Count Constantin de Volney, Joseph Priestly, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Marquise de Condorcet, Thomas Paine and William Godwin.¹¹

Like their commonwealth predecessors, these authors warned their audiences that the decline of civilization resulted from corruption. But, while Whig theorists remained critical of the promise or potential of human nature, these more optimistic contributors to


¹¹Works by these authors included, Volney, The Ruins; or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires (1791), Priestly, Lectures on History and General Policy (1788), Rousseau, Social Contract (1762) and Emile (1763), Condorcet, Progress of the Human Mind (1795), Paine, The Rights of Man (1790), and Godwin, Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793).
the Revolutionary Enlightenment displayed an unerring confidence in the triumph of man, whose reason equipped them to overcome superstition, overthrow oppression, and pursue the path of virtue. More importantly, they viewed revolution, violent or otherwise, as a natural and potentially inevitable part of the process. As Cordorcet and Priestly both claimed, human progress, as exhibited by the spreading influence of the Enlightenment, allowed man to break from his past and encouraged him to rely on the general will as a guide for charting a new future. Rather than warn of the excesses of democracy and popular sovereignty, these authors embraced the potential power of the will of the people and called on leaders to harness its authority to ensure a successful break from an oppressive and tyrannical past.12

The students at the College of William and Mary willingly absorbed the lessons they learned in their political course, a subject “studied with so much ardour, and . . . which . . . is considered so preeminently a favorite” at the school. In the late 1790s, for example, Joseph Shelton Watson contended that the works of Rousseau, Locke, and Paine were “the most excellent that have ever been written upon the Science of Politics.” He confirmed that many students felt it was “an act of treason against the truth, to utter a syllable to the prejudice of Rousseau.” Similarly, Joseph Carrington Cabell, a classmate of Watson’s and a Coles family friend, boasted that when “Rousseau, Montesquieu, Smith, and [Vattel] are the textbooks on Politics at this college, how can the Political tenets of the young men be wrong?” Few should doubt, declared Cabell, that the students at the

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College "are purely Democratic. . . . Democrats we have in abundance," he continued, "some moderate, some warm, & some red hot." Indeed, many students displayed their commitment to the revolutionary ideals they absorbed by dating their correspondence "Anno Rep." or "A. R." — in the year of the Republic — while they addressed the envelopes to, or signed with the postscript, "Citizen."¹³

Edward's older brother Isaac acknowledged that by exposing students to the more radical practitioners of the Revolutionary Enlightenment, the Bishop risked radicalizing students more than he intended. In a letter to a fellow classmate, Henry St. George Tucker, also a distant family relation, Isaac A. Coles admitted that if the students "do not acquire more knowledge they at least acquire more liberality & more ambition than at any other place in the world." On the one hand, this created the potential for the school to produce students who could "shine forth with a splendor that dazzles the continent." On the other hand, an education that encouraged free-thinking threatened to create a student body willing to carry their "Democratic principles too far," so far that they might "make the common mechanics and apprentices . . . intimate friends." For the older Coles and many of his fellow collegians, such behavior was "very dangerous" and "resembles a ship in a tempestuous ocean without a rudder." He firmly believed, however, that "[t]he spirit of skepticism . . . which every student acquired as soon as he touched the threshold of the college" was an essential "step toward knowledge" and a safeguard against such

¹³Joseph Shelton Watson to David Watson, January 17, 1801, "Letters from William and Mary College, 1798-1801," VMHB 29 (April 1921), 159-69; Joseph C. Cabell to David Watson, July 8, 1798 and March 4, 1798, Joseph Carrington Cabell Papers, SLWM. For the dates and postscripts, see Joseph Shelton Watson to David Watson, February 9, 1799, March 2, April 1, and October 26, 1801, "Letters from William and Mary College," VMHB 29 (April 1921), 139, 155, 161, and 165.
developments. From his perspective, an enlightened education that introduced students to the ideals of the Revolution and prepared young men for their future place as leaders of the new nation required such a risk.¹⁴

Just as it made them explore the more democratic implications of republicanism, so too did their exposure to the radical political theorists of the era lead the students to express publicly their opposition to the Federalist political agenda. Convinced that the Adams administration pursued a foreign policy detrimental to “the future destiny of our Country,” a sizeable group of students published an address in the spring of 1798 warning of the consequences of continued hostilities between America and France. Echoing the lessons they learned in their classical history and moral philosophy readings, the students reminded their representatives that “all governments, and particularly representative governments” were susceptible to the corruption and eventual ruin that routinely accompanied the expansion of executive power during a time of war. They expressed the fear that, as had occurred under Caesar, the raising of a standing army would become “an engine for the destruction of our liberties.” Joseph Carrington Cabell similarly viewed the spring and summer of 1798 as a time of “crisis, when . . . a mode of thinking both dangerous & illusory, is spreading among us,” but he found comfort in the knowledge that, at least in Williamsburg, the majority opposed the administration’s policies. To ensure that no one doubted their disgust with Adams and his policies toward France, several students “paraded through the streets of Williamsburg” during the 1798 Fourth of

July celebration and concluded their march by burning John Adams in effigy.\textsuperscript{13}

The political preferences of the students were even more evident during the months preceding and following the presidential election of 1800. As he anxiously awaited the election results, Joseph Shelton Watson contended that “the conduct of the late administration threatened us with a relapse, which would have been ruinous to America, joyous to tyrants, and unfortunate for the human race.” One of his classmates agreed and credited “the number of innocent victims of the oppressive sedition law, the repeated and frequent violations of the Constitution, the want of that cabalistic term ‘French Invasion’ and perhaps the operation of Congressional taxes” with forcing “the people to reflect and endeavor to avoid the dangerous abyss, on the brink of which they have so long tottered.”

Once news of Jefferson’s victory was confirmed, William and Mary’s student body erupted into celebration. “The students assembled in the number of nearly 60, and marched in body down the street, with shouts, huzzas, [and] whirling of hats.” The entire affair, observed one student, caused enthusiasm for Jefferson to spread “thro the whole town” and “occasioned an very astonishing . . . interruption of business.” Although all the nation’s post-revolutionary colleges shared a commitment to ensuring that the rising generation of national leaders acquired a commitment to republican principles, only the College of William and Mary demonstrated a strong preference for Jeffersonian

\textsuperscript{13}Address of the Students of William and Mary College, signed John B. Johnson, Chairman and John Tayloe Lomax, Secretary, June 8, 1798, Chronology File, 1781-1815, SLWM. See also Philadelphia Aurora, June 18, 1798. Joseph Carrington Cabell to David Watson, July 8, 1798, Joseph Carrington Cabell Papers, SLWM and Robert J. Morrison, ed., “Memoranda Relating to the College,” \textit{WMQ} 1st Ser. 27 (July 1918), 232.
democracy. Thus, when one student declared that the College was “famous for Republicanism,” he undoubtedly meant both the abstract political principles as well as the emerging political party.  

Edward Coles enjoyed a particularly personal relationship with Bishop James Madison and came to view the aging college president as a mentor. As he confessed many years later, “[w]ith this truly great & good man, I was more intimate & sociable than the students generally were.” The Bishop had been a long-time friend of his parents and was also distantly connected to the Coles family by marriage. The Bishop’s younger cousin, James Madison, Jr., married Dolly Payne Todd, likewise a Coles cousin, in 1789. Bishop Madison also may have attended the couple’s nuptial celebration at the Coles family estate, Enniscorthy. More immediately, however, several of Coles’s brothers had attended the College of William and Mary during the post-revolutionary period and had fond memories of their tutelage under Bishop Madison. Their previous attendance at the school ensured an immediate familiarity between Coles and the college president. “This intimacy,” declared Coles, “emboldened me before class to ask questions, & gave me opportunities,” he continued, “of conversing privately with the amiable old Bishop on subjects on which he lectured.” Consequently, although he was probably predisposed to embrace republican political ideas, Coles’s exposure to the political authors in the

16Joseph Shelton Watson to David Watson, December 24, 1799 and March 2, 1801, “Letters from William and Mary,” VMHB 29 (April 1921), 161; Chapman Johnson to David Watson, May 18, 1800 and Joseph C. Cabell to David Watson, April 6, 1801, “Letters to David Watson,” VMHB 29 (July 1921), 271 and 279. Two years into Thomas Jefferson’s first term, support for his administration remained strong at the college. In January 1802, Thomas L. Preston reported that “Politics in this place have entirely subsided. We are, however, all republicans, and consequently read the President’s message with ecstasy and applause.” See Thomas L. Preston to Andrew Reid, Jr., January 7, 1802, “Glimpses of Old College Life,” WMQ 1st Ser. 8 (April 1900), 216.
Bishop's moral philosophy course as well as his frequent private conversations with the school president led him to develop an optimistic view of human nature, a strong commitment to the idea of popular sovereignty, and an unwavering devotion to Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and the Republican party. Like most of his fellow-collegians, Coles left Williamsburg an ardent supporter of Jeffersonian democracy.17

Most post-revolutionary leaders agreed that a practical understanding of the political and philosophical foundations of a republican form of government, regardless of party affinity, meant little if those being trained for public life lacked the moral sense or virtue required to produce a harmonious and happy republican society. Consequently, a second component of Bishop Madison's moral philosophy course focused on the cultivation of good moral judgment. The students encountered authors who emphasized the importance of self-restraint and moderation, writers who maintained that the preservation of liberty and the promotion of happiness required a virtuous citizenry. Reading and close study of important moral philosophers, however, was not the only means of cultivating sound reasoning and good moral judgement. Instead, the development of a good moral sense also resulted from small-scale, day-to-day exchanges between men and women. Through intimate social interactions, individuals learned tolerance, flexibility, and, most importantly, established a standard of moral taste and created the social bonds that promoted a harmonious society.18 In addition to developing

17Edward Coles, "Autobiography," April 1844, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.

a sound commitment to republican principles, then, Madison hoped to transform his students into enlightened men of sensibility who had mastered the art of sociability; for, together, correct political views and refined sensibility would ensure the emergence of an enlightened ruling class capable of sustaining a stable republican social order. As one student proclaimed, only “a Republican Government can secure substantial and permanent happiness.”

Edward Coles’s father understood the importance of combining a formal education with the cultivation of refined manners and sociability. Although he probably regretted to hear about the unfortunate condition of the college, John Coles was much more interested in whether or not his youngest son had “been invited out by any of the Town Gentlemen.” Herbert Clairborne, whose son attended the College of William and Mary between 1802 and 1806, similarly recognized the value of developing appropriate social ties with members of the Williamsburg community. Writing to his son in the winter of 1803, Clairborne congratulated his namesake for “mak[ing] yourself ‘friends that [display fine] Conduct’” and assured him that such “affections [were] better to a young man, than a Command of thousands ‘Without it.’” Another father agreed with Clairborne, but focused


particular attention on the life-long beneficial consequences of developing a refined sense of sociability. "I am . . . pleased with the circle of your Acquaintance," declared Thomas Todd, for "it is by associating with the virtuous & respectable part of the community that we learn & imitate laudable Actions 'til they become habitual & familiar." It was only by mastering the art of conversation and social interaction, maintained the elder Todd, that a young man could ensure his advancement in life.  

Perfectly aware of their father's views on the issue, Coles and his fellow students arrived at the college with a general sense of what constituted appropriate behavior and readily attempted to judge whom among their fellow students was worthy of their friendship and acquaintance. When he returned to Williamsburg for his second year at the college, for example, Coles assured his father that his roommate, William Tucker of Bermuda, was "a very good scholar and more moral and less dissipated than young men generally are here." Similarly, Samuel Myers, who boarded in town with a prominent gentleman, informed his father that two new students, "both sober youths," had taken up residence in the Tazwell household. Severn Parker, he testified, was "a young man of considerable talent and learning" and his other new roommate, William C. Sommerville, "is a clever young man and well spoken." All of these young men seemed to possess the qualities, academic ambition and genteel deportment, that post-revolutionary fathers

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20John Coles to Edward Coles, December 14, 1805, Edward Coles Collection, HSP; Herbert Clairborne to Herbert A. Clairborne, December 13, 1803, Clairborne Family Papers, 1665-1911, Section 5, Virginia Historical Society (hereafter VHS); Thomas Todd to Charles S. Todd, June 4, 1808, "Letters of Judge Thomas Todd," WMQ 1st Ser. 22 (July 1900), 23.
hoped their sons would aspire to emulate.\textsuperscript{21}

The sphere of student social activity, however, extended beyond the confines of the college and the homes or taverns in which they boarded. Consequently, students
universally recognized that an active social life that involved dining and conversing with Williamsburg elites was an essential component of their educational experience and praised the quality of the social environment they encountered. Garret Minor, who attended the college in 1797, declared that "my greatest source of real improvement and gratification results from" attending the social gatherings in town. Although the society he encountered was certainly enjoyable, he maintained that it was his intercourse with "the ladies of this place" that allowed him to "gain real improvement." Similarly, Thomas L. Preston testified that the "conviviality which has long characterized this place, is still one of its strong features. The ladies," he continued, "are . . . agreeable enough and much disposed to sociability." William T. Barry, a contemporary of Coles's, confessed that although his attendance at local balls and parties "sometimes encroaches on my studies," he thought his time was well-spent, "for it will tend to give a polish to the manners, that is absolutely essential to enable us to glide smoothly thro' society."\textsuperscript{22} The ideal enlightened gentlemen for most of these young men was an individual who struck a balance between the pursuit of learning and social refinement and they attempted to mold themselves

\textsuperscript{21}Edward Coles to Papa, November 2, 1806, Edward Coles Collection, HSP; Samuel Myers to John Myers, October 26, 1808, Faculty-Alumni File, Samuel Myers, WM 1808/09, SLWM.

\textsuperscript{22}Garret Minor to David Watson, April 28, 1798, "Letter from William and Mary," \textit{VMHB} 30 (July 1922), 245; Thomas L. Preston to Andrew Reid, Jr., January 9, 1803, "Glimpses of Old College Life," \textit{WMQ} 8 (April 1900), 218; William T. Barry to [Brother], February 6, 1804, "Letters of William T. Barry," \textit{WMQ} 1\textsuperscript{st} Ser. 8 (July 1904), 111.
accordingly by ingratiating themselves into the elite social circles of Williamsburg.

The old colonial capital certainly offered Coles plenty of opportunities to socialize. The town itself contained no fewer than five taverns, boasted several boarding houses and was the site of a variety of public and private social gatherings. Although he repeatedly informed his parents that "I have not a moment to bestow on pleasure," Coles was routinely drawn to student social functions. Even his slow recovery from a broken leg, an injury he sustained while wrestling with St. George Tucker's son, Beverley, failed to deter him. In November 1806, Coles informed his parents that he was continually "tempted to dance" and was unable to avoid attending the social events in Williamsburg. Like Coles, most William and Mary students entered Williamsburg's "circle of fashionable company" by attending parties and public balls. Chapman Johnson wrote a friend in 1799 that "there have been no less than four balls since I came to town & there will be another this week." Similarly, Joseph Carrington Cabell, who had pledged "to shun the gay scenes of pleasure and dissipation" while pursuing his law studies, admitted to his friend that "scarcely a single Ball or Party of pleasure has escaped me." Indeed, one young woman who frequented the town parties hosted and attended by the students found the occasions particularly "edifying, for before dancing commenced the Gentlemen discussed a political subject, [and] some of them display'd great eloquence." Her only regret was that the gentlemen's parties rarely occurred more than once a week.²³

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²³Edward Coles to Papa, November 21, 1806 and "Biographical Notes," 1868, Edward Coles Collection, HSP; Chapman Johnson to David Watson, December 19, 1799 and Joseph Carrington Cabell to David Watson, April 6, 1801, "Letters to David Watson," VMHB 29 (April 1921), 265-67 and 276-79; Jane C. Charlton to Sarah C. Watts, January 10, 1808, Sarah C. Watts Papers, SLWM.
Yet, just as often as students assured their fathers and friends of the quality of the young men they studied with and praised the character of society they encountered in Williamsburg, a number of other students complained that “the habits of indolence and . . . of dissipation” were too common among their classmates. In 1801, for example, Joseph Shelton Watson thanked his brother for advising him “upon the subject of manners. Ease, plainness and simplicity of manners have been always charming in my eyes. But never as charming,” he continued, “as when opposed to vanity, affectation, and stiffness.” Unfortunately, his experiences in Williamsburg provided too many occasions to conduct such comparisons. He regretted to report that only about “one fourth” of the student body “are industrious and promising.” The rest, he declared, were “devoid of emulation, with a sluggish inactivity of mind, [and] pass their moments away in a total insensibility to the importance of their time, and the advantages which they possess.” William T. Barry expressed similar shock and dismay when he discovered that “there are but few young men of talents at College.” Blaming “the dissipation of the place,” Barry explained that even “young men of cleverness after being here awhile are apt to fall into the current of dissipation.” Since many of those who attended the school believed that “Social intercourse” with their fellow students constituted “One great source of improvement,” the presence of “violence . . . illiberality, and passion” among their peers inspired regret and disappointment.24

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24Joseph Shelton Watson to David Watson, March 2, 1801, “Letter of William and Mary College,” *VMHB* 29 (April 1921), 164; William T. Barry to [Brother], February 6, 1804, “Letters of William T. Barry,” *WMQ* 1st Ser. 8 (July 1904), 111; and Garret Minor to David Watson, April 28, 1798, “Letters from William and Mary College,” *VMHB* 30 (July 1922), 244-45.
Although some of them seemed to arrive in Williamsburg unfamiliar with the proper limits of social behavior, students and parents alike hoped the time students spent at college would teach them the moderation and self-restraint necessary to become enlightened gentlemen. Designed to create enlightened men of sensibility, men who would conduct themselves with dignity, generosity, and benevolence, Bishop Madison's moral philosophy course included readings from a selection of many of the most important contributors to the Scottish Common Sense philosophy. Although students continued to read and recite from Sophocles, Herodotus, Horace, and particularly Cicero and Lucretius, two writers who emphasized the importance of classical virtue, Coles and his fellow students also read, on their own and in the classroom, authors such as Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, James Beattie, Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, Francis Hutcheson, and Hugh Blair. Additionally, the Bishop supplemented these Scottish philosophers with several American authors, including Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Rush.25

Through these authors, Bishop Madison sought to instill his students not only with a strong belief that man possessed a rational sense that enabled him to make correct moral judgements, but also with the firm conviction that the foundation of American

liberty was based on the pursuit of happiness. By nurturing their ability to reason and promoting their understanding of the utility of moral consistency and moderation, Bishop Madison hoped the students would go forth from the college with the understanding that when they applied reason to their cultivated sensibilities they would be able to exercise effective moral judgment. Throughout his life, Coles would rely on the lessons he absorbed from these readings to regulate his own behavior, aide him in his efforts to evaluate those he encountered, and serve as a justification for claiming a place among the nation's more refined class of political and social elite.

No work emphasized the strong relationship between restraint, virtue and the pursuit of happiness more than John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). As the source of the phrase "pursuit of happiness" made famous in the *Declaration of Independence*, Locke's *Essay* was well-known to nearly the entire revolutionary generation. Familiarity with his ideas, many believed, had to be encouraged among the rising generation if the experiment in independence was to succeed and, consequently, every post-revolutionary college assigned the work. According to Locke, a soundly developed intellect and good moral judgment were essential to the pursuit of happiness. As they sought to construct a harmonious society, individuals constantly employed their reason to discover whether individual desire or self-interest was consistent with the general happiness of society. Like Aristotle, with whom William and Mary

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students were equally familiar, Locke suggested that prosperity combined with virtue created happiness. But, for Locke even more than Aristotle, the pursuit of happiness required "Caution, Deliberation, and Wariness." An individual who privileged the general happiness of society over his own self-interest, or who attempted to align his private desires with the common good through the "Moderation & Restraint of our Passions," would preserve individual liberty and achieve true happiness. Thus, by requiring his students to study and recite Locke, Madison attempted to encourage the young men attending the college to develop the habits of moderation and restraint necessary to construct a happy and harmonious republican society.27

Bishop Madison similarly hoped to address the issue of moral consistency, of developing good moral judgment, by assigning Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and Francis Hutcheson’s *A System of Moral Philosophy* (1755). Although in these works the authors frequently criticized and disagreed with one another on specific points, they collectively encouraged students to think for themselves, to explore and question what behaviors and actions were morally good and evil, and discover the best way to make themselves worthy of authority in a virtuous republic. From Smith, the students learned that a man of good moral standing, “A man of sensibility,” should “feel great uneasiness” if he allowed even “an honourable passion” to exert too much influence over his actions. Like Locke, he recommended that individuals pursue an ideal

in which they demonstrated a "moderate sensibility." Hutcheson declared that an individual acquires moral goodness through reflection and the desire to feel and gain the approval of others. When combined with Locke, who argued that voluntary action became moral when it conformed or complied with divine law, civil regulation, or the law of opinion and reputation, the students at the College of William and Mary learned that their moral integrity, more often than not, required the public affirmation of both their college peers and the members of their community. As he struggled to come to terms with his own understanding of what constituted good moral behavior, Coles constantly turned to others, particularly Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, both close family friends, for support in the choices he strove to make.

Additionally, the students were exposed to Thomas Reid, digesting his *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense* (1765), and after 1785, possibly his *Essays on the Intellectual Power of Man* (1785) and *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788). Reid emphasized man's duty to both himself and others. He contended that every individual ought to endeavor to discover his duty and then to follow through by accomplishing that duty. Moral men, according to Reid, preferred the greater

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good to the lesser and sought, always, to comply with the intentions of nature as understood by studying the world around them. Accordingly, as each individual struggled to understand his role in society and discover his duty toward his fellow man, Reid offered a fairly familiar maxim as guidance: virtuous and moral men treated others as they themselves wished to be treated. Like Adams, Hutcheson, and Locke, Reid's moral philosophy required individuals to live actively as members of their community and to judge their own moral behavior as well as the behavior of others according to a shared, community-developed, opinion of what constituted good and evil. While God, who frequently functioned as an "impartial observer," was important, the lessons of life forged in the natural world shaped human conceptions of morality.  

Significantly, Hutcheson and other Scottish Common Sense writers insisted on more than just the existence of a moral sense that allowed individuals to make sound moral judgements. They also proposed that through the art of communication, and particularly the polite conversation performed during intimate social interactions that occurred during parties, dinners, and balls, men and women constructed a shared world of moral experience. Hutcheson and Smith in particular, but also Reid, emphasized that it was during these social interactions that a standard of moral taste, a standard of correct and appropriate moral behavior, was established. The only flaw with their theory of sociability, however, was the problem of validation. Their explanation of the creation of a moral standard required those who judged behavior to communicate their approval or

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disapproval. Silent on just who the ultimate judges were supposed to be, Hutcheson and others left their audience without a mechanism to determine whether or not their behavior fell within the boundaries of appropriate moral behavior. This difficulty would arise repeatedly for Coles as he attempted to cultivate and maintain his own claim to authority in both Illinois and Pennsylvania.

The college administration attempted to resolve this problem by codifying a set of regulations designed to establish clear boundaries of appropriate behavior. In 1792, for example, the Board of Visitors published a set of statutes that prohibited “duelling, gaming, quarrelling, profane swearing and cursing, [and] immorality of every kind.” The new statute also forbade any students from attending “balls, or . . . dining or supping in any public house” and granted the administration authority to punish “all breaches of good order and decorum, whether practiced within or without the walls of the University.” The regulations were re-issued in 1802, but the students were also required to testify to their support for the rules by signing the statute and were forced to endure a public reading “at least three times during each term.” Four years later, just after Coles arrived in Williamsburg, the statues were once again revised, with the additional requirements that students “devote certain stated hours to study” and observe a curfew. Together, these regulations were intended to diminish the instances of misbehavior and disorder and encourage good moral behavior.  


31Statutes of the College in 1792,” WMQ 1st Ser. 20 (July 1911), 52-54; “A Statute For the Wholesome Government of the College,” March 24, 1802, William and Mary College Papers, Folder 4,
Most students agreed with the restrictions imposed by the college statutes and were eager for the administration to impose the regulations when they were violated. In 1798, for example, Edward's older brother, Isaac, informed a friend that "a large party made an attack upon the sacred property of God." Not only did they destroy the communion table, scatter prayer books and bibles across the church yard, and smash several windows, but they also "bedaubed" the pulpit "from one end to the other, with human excrement. An offense so heinous," he declared, that it "called aloud for punishment." On another occasion the students "amuse[d] themselves by putting the town to rights." After a night of drinking and eating at a local tavern, a group of students paraded through town "pulling down the palings of the yards and gardens of several inhabitants" and scattered outhouses, carriages, wagons and carts up and down Duke of Gloucester street. As Joseph Shelton Watson observed, "They committed a damage far too great for any frolick of that kind; were such frolicks pardonable under any circumstances." To the dismay of the students who reported the details of these events, however, the college administration failed to impose the college regulations and the individuals who breached the accepted norms of decorum were allowed to remain at the school.32

Students, however, did not always support the administration's policies, choosing

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32 Isaac A. Coles to David Watson, March 21, 1798, "Letters from William and Mary," VMHB 30 (July 1922), 241; Joseph Shelton Watson to David Watson, March 2, 1801, "Letters from William and Mary," VMHB 29 (April 1921), 161-65.
instead to judge the behavior of their classmates by a student-generated code of moral behavior based on honor. In February 1802, for example, John Yates and Richard Lee fought a duel that resulted in a wounded Yates and the expulsion of both men from the college. The students disagreed with the punishment, arguing that the sentence was "unwarranted for want of sufficient evidence," and immediately erupted into rebellion.

"The college," observed Thomas L. Preston, "is in complete confusion. No business is done," he continued, "and a number of students have withdrawn their names." Worse still, many of the collegians displayed their disapproval by committing "Violence to the college and property of some inhabitants." As Henry St. George Tucker reported, after the professors ignored the student objections, they "broke the windows of every professor (Mr. Andrews excepted) together with those of the church and Chapel, tore up, in great measure, the bibles & prayer books, and finally broke open Bouchans shop door." Before the affair concluded, nearly "half the whole number" of students abandoned the school. Although both Yates and Lee remained expelled from the college, the students continued to judge one another's behavior according to their own code of honor.33

Not surprisingly, the code of honor asserted by students conflicted sharply with the moral standard advocated by the president and college administration. These conflicting

33Thomas L. Preston to Andrew Reid, Jr., February 22, 1802 and (?) to Dr. Reid, April 15, 1802, "Glimpses of Old College Life," WMQ 1st Ser. 8 (April 1900), 216-17 and Tucker quoted in Ruby Orders Osborne, "The College of William and Mary in Virginia, 1800-1827," (Ed. D. Thesis, College of William and Mary, 1981), 94-95, citing Henry St. George Tucker to Joseph C. Cabell, March 28, 1802, Cabell Family Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. The duel and resulting rebellion provoked considerable criticism outside the college, see The New York Post, April 3, 1802; The Connecticut Courant, April 12, 1802; Boston Gazette, April 15, 1802; and Columbian Centinel, April 10, 1802 in William and Mary College Papers, Folder 14, SLWM. See also Osborne, "The College of William and Mary in Virginia," 95-97. All of these critics charged that the duel and subsequent rebellion could be attributed to the radical politics and irreligious views of Thomas Jefferson.
ideas of good moral behavior were probably responsible for the wave of student disorders that plagued most post-revolutionary colleges. Between 1790 and 1820, students at the College of William and Mary as well as at other schools rebelled against college administrations with astonishing frequency. Students generally justified their decision to riot by claiming their behavior was an appropriate response to verbal abuse by town inhabitants, inadequate institutional support, or unfair college regulations. At the College of William and Mary, the students, more often than not, contended that student rebellions represented legitimate challenges to the administration’s misapplication of authority, or justifiable actions intended to preserve the honor and reputation of their fellow collegians. Rebellions and duels functioned as opportunities to distinguish themselves from the generation that preceded them and to establish their reputations as individuals committed to a culture that privileged honor and ambition over conformity and deference.34

34The scholarship explaining the causes of student rebellions is relatively extensive, but inconclusive. Leon Jackson argues that student rebellions were a reflection of conflicting student understandings of friendship and association that were exacerbated by a context in which students were condescendingly treated as children by their professors and forced to endure a college environment that was extremely oppressive. Helen Horowitz contends that college riots were the result of conflicts between college disciplinarians and the genteel expectations of elite sons of Southern gentry and Northern merchants. Dickson Bruce holds that college rioting was simply “a way of blowing off steam” and that their violent behavior represented either undergraduate impatience or “coming-of-age” antics. Steven J. Novak, argues that the post-revolutionary generation craved a cause that would allow them to demonstrate their republican loyalties and that the rebellions were a product of student efforts to manufacture such a cause. James McLachlan suggests that student rebellions resulted from “disruptions in the internal dynamics of the student societies.” See Leon Jackson, “The Rights of Man and the Rites of Youth: Fraternity and Riot at Eighteenth-Century Harvard,” in The American College in the Nineteenth Century, edited by Roger Geiger, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 46-79; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 11 and 23-29; Dickson D. Bruce, Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 63-64; Steven J. Novak, The Rights of Youth: American Colleges and Student Revolts, 1798-1815 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 11-15; and McLachlan, “The Choice of Hercules.” William and Mary poses a particular problem for at least three of these arguments. The structure of the college was very fluid, allowing students to pursue a course of study according to their own design. Moreover, the college administration inconsistently enforced their regulations, often allowing students who violated the college rules to remain in or return to the college.
Despite the conflicting aspects of student and administration codes of behavior, many students praised those who seemed to embody the precise mixture of enlightened learning and sensibility they were exposed to during their moral philosophy course and that most students aspired to achieve. According to Edward Coles no one embodied the ideal they intended to emulate more than Bishop James Madison, whom he described as “a man not less distinguished for his extensive learning & profound knowledge of all subjects, than for the goodness & purity of his character, &,” he continued, “in an especial manner for [his] . . . peculiar meekness of deportment, & philanthropic feelings.” Indeed, most of the students at the school celebrated the character of the college president and attributed the reputation of the institution to his stewardship. Chapman Johnson maintained that Madison’s “politeness of behavior, his openness of disposition, his easiness of manners, his affability and familiarity in conversation, which when added, . . . to his extensive information, great virtues and moral rectitude of conduct, irresistibly engaged the esteem and admiration of all who are acquainted with him.” Garret Minor argued that “this College owes its present existence to his unwearied exertion in its favour.” If Bishop Madison’s “supporting influence [were] taken away,” Minor believed, “the whole system would fall into anarchy and even annihilation.”

So, the college failed to provide a particularly oppressive environment. It is also unclear that William and Mary students required riots to unleash their anti-Federalist sympathies, for they seemed to have enjoyed a considerable degree of freedom to express their views in other ways. Lastly, student societies appear to have come and gone with unpredictable frequency at the College of William and Mary, and therefore, offer a poor explanation for sustained conflict among the students.

Many students similarly achieved the characteristic elements of the ideal enlightened man of sensibility and provoked the praise of their contemporaries. A student who attended the school in the late 1790s, for example, reported that Joseph Carrington Cabell not only displayed “the most ardent love of Science,” but also possessed “those attentive easy and respectful manners which never fails to seize upon the affections.” Similarly, he maintained that even among young men who “though by nature [were] endowed with no extraordinary degree of acuteness, no energy, and certainly no brilliancy of talents,” the vigilant pursuit of a “regular education and diligent attention” to the cultivation of sociability ensured that they would “prove useful to . . . [the] Country.”

At least one town belle agreed that many students had achieved such a reputation. In a poem entitled “Our Friends,” a female resident of Williamsburg celebrated the accomplishments of several students. Of Carter Henry Harrison, a student between 1797 and 1799, she proclaimed:

Harrison the genuine virtues of thy youthful heart,
Cherished by reason, refined to sublime,
Nursed by honor, truth, & worth,

William Tyler observed that “The death of Bishop Madison has wrought a very material changed in the state of Win & Mary College, which since that event has been deserted by a great number of the Students.” Perhaps most frightening to the students, Madison’s replacement, Dr. John Augustine Smith, lacked the political perspective and philosophical talent to prepare Virginia’s young men adequately. Joseph Shelton Watkins complained that the new president “is an old Scotch tory who would glory in the downfall of our free government & would gladly exchange our republican simplicity & [love?] of liberty, for the vile and pompous trappings of English tyranny.” Instead of benefitting from the guidance of an “enlightened politician & a profound Philosopher,” Watkins declared, Virginia’s brightest potential leaders would suffer from the instruction of “a most notorious federalist and a man not well versed [enough] in politics to conduct us to the fields of science.” See William C. Tyler to William Linton, April 11, 1812, Marshall Family Papers and Joseph S. Watkins to Henry Carrington, [undated?], Henry Carrington Papers, 1807-1875, Virginia Historical Society.

Joseph Shelton Watson to David Watson, October 26, 1801, “Letters from William and Mary,” VMHB 29 (April 1921), 156-57.

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Called loud for admiration from us all.

She likewise identified John Clayton Pryor, who married Elizabeth Armistead Tyler, another town belle, in April 1798, as “worthy of our highest praise.” Of him, she declared:

There’s nought true courage prompts,
Or virtue justifies, or honor calls,
But Pryor dare attempt;
His sense and manners both engage,
To smile contempt, on folly’s ways.

Throughout the ode, the author celebrated both the refined sociability and enlightened learning Bishop Madison himself embodied and that he hoped his students would acquire during their tenure at the college. She consistently highlighted the student “who steadily winds his way up science’s mount” and the young men who displayed “modesty,” “grace,” and “heroic ardour.” For this particular young woman, the young men who achieved the republican ideal of an enlightened man of learning and sensibility while simultaneously displaying their honorable character possessed “A soul most worthy of admiration.”

Throughout his life, Edward Coles would strive to earn such commendations.

While he certainly shared his fellow-students’s desire to achieve the ideal of an enlightened man of sensibility, Edward Coles’s exposure to moral theory led him to come to a profound, and relatively unique, conclusion. As he confessed in his autobiography, written thirty years later, it was during Bishop Madison’s moral philosophy course that “I had my attention first awakened to the state of master & slave.” During one of the college president’s lectures “explaining the rights of man,” Coles questioned that if all men were

37 “Our Friends,” 1800, Chronology File, 1781-1815, SLWM.
born free and equal by nature, then "how can you hold a slave – how can man be made the property of man?" While Madison confirmed Coles's conclusion that holding another man in slavery "could not be rightfully done, ... [and] could not be justified on principle," the Bishop claimed that the institution persisted "by our finding it [already] in existence, & the difficulty of getting rid of it." Unsatisfied with this response, Coles then asked "Was it right to do what we believe to be wrong, because our forefathers did it?" After several conversations with Madison during class, and more casually in the privacy of the college president's residence, the young Virginian concluded that "If he could not reconcile Slavery with his principles, & did not believe man could have a property in his fellow man, he ought not to hold slaves," even if the law permitted him to do so. Even the threat of a slave rebellion in the spring of his first year at the college, which caused the students to patrol "several nights successively until all apprehensions of danger subsided," failed to weaken Coles's resolve. Echoes of Thomas Reid must have rung through Edward's ears as he arrived at his decision. As Reid had instructed, Coles ultimately resolved the issue by determining what he believed to be his moral duty, not only to himself but to the enslaved men and women he would inherit, and, thereafter, committed his energy toward following through with his conviction.38

Coles was not the only student to question whether or not slavery was consistent with republican society. William Brockenbrough, who attended the College of William

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38Coles, "Autobiography," April 1844, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. On the threat of a slave insurrection, see W. Radford to Andrew Reid, Jr., April 6, 1806, "Glimpses of Old College Life," *WMQ* 1st Ser. 8 (April 1900), 219. Radford reported "We have had considerable alarm in this place, owing to some suspicions that were excited by an insurrection of the negroes. The students were very active on the occasion."
and Mary between 1798 and 1801, asked if liberty was a perfect right, then “ought our Negroes to enjoy Freedom?” He also wondered if Virginia’s enslaved population “would be perfectly right in obtaining it [freedom] by turning upon their masters.” For this Virginian, however, the prospect that such actions would result in the destruction of the “Vestige[s] of Virtue & Science,” only to have them replaced by “an age of Barbarism & Darkness,” required him to deny enslaved blacks their right to freedom. Undoubtedly, fresh memories of the slave revolt in San Domingo shaped the trajectory of his logic. Perhaps, as well, though, Adam Smith’s advice that a moral man should allow caution to prevail over even the most noble of passions justified Brockenbrough’s moderation. Rather than admit that every individual possessed the right to freedom, he preferred to allow slavery to persist by concluding that “perfect Rights may sometimes be imperfect ones, & imperfect Rights, perfect,” especially when such moderation allowed for the preservation of a harmonious society.39

Unlike Brockenbrough, who concluded that the prospect of slave rebellion was cause for caution, Chapman Johnson viewed the threat of an insurrection as justification for doubting his commitment to preserving the institution of slavery. “We are told,” reported Johnson in January 1802, “that a serious alarm has been lately experienced in Notaway. In Williamsburg,” he continued, “we have had a slight (though I believe an unfounded) apprehension of disturbance.” Shocked by the possibility, Johnson asked “Is it

39William Brockenbrough to Joseph C. Cabell, April 29, 1798, Cabell Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, cited in May, Enlightenment in America, 249. May argues that “the frank discussion of the rights of slaves was not uncommon at just this period in the letters of young upper-class Virginians.”

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not miserable, is it not shameful, is it not unworthy [of] the character of Virginians, or of men, thus to live [as] the unsafe trembling tyrants of an unhappy people?" While fears of violence and disruption led most Virginians to preserve the institution of slavery regardless of its contradictions with their principles, Johnson felt the good of society may require drastic action in the opposite direction. Still, referring to the call for restraint issued by Adam Smith and Francis Hutcheson, Johnson reproached himself by proclaiming that "The subject almost deprives me of moderation."^40

Moderation and a pragmatic approach to the issue of slavery, as Coles would be disappointed to witness, prevailed during the post-revolutionary era. Like Brockenbrough and Johnson, most political leaders preferred to avoid discussing the issue, fearing that any emancipation scheme would threaten the stability of the social order. On the national level, by the early nineteenth century public leaders had already established the habit of privileging the preservation of the union over ethical concerns. In 1787, the members of the constitutional convention accepted the three-fifths clause to satisfy slaveholders in Georgia and South Carolina and had similarly pledged not to interfere with the slave trade until 1808. Then during the 1790s, national representatives agreed to table any antislavery petitions submitted to Congress, fearful that any public discussion of the issue would further weaken the already fragile nation.41 Although Virginia experimented with

^40Chapman Johnson to David Watson, January 24, 1802, "Letters to David Watson," VMHB 29 (July 1921), 280.

liberalizing its emancipation laws in 1782 and witnessed an increase in manumissions in the last decades of the eighteenth century, proslavery petitions, local and international threats of insurrection, and economic concerns conspired to undermine the antislavery impulse generated by the Revolution. Perhaps equally important, the idea that blacks were innately inferior to white Americans was gaining currency at the turn of the century and contributed to the pragmatic inclination to maintain the slave system.\footnote{Gary B. Nash, \textit{Race and Revolution} (Madison: Madison House, 1990); William H. Freehling, \textit{Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 121-43; Alison Goodyear Freehling, \textit{Drift Toward Disunion: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-32} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); and Anthony Iaccarino, \textit{"Virginia and the National Contest Over Slavery in the Early Republic, 1780-1833."} (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1999). These historians argue that Virginians experienced a moment or series of moments of opportunity to abolish slavery. They failed, however, to take advantage of the chance. For an alternative point of view, see Eva Sheppard, \textit{"The Question of Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to the Slavery Debate of 1832,"} (Ph. D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2000); Duncan J. MacLeod, \textit{Slavery, Race, and the American Revolution} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); David Brion Davis, \textit{The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); Robert McColley, \textit{Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973); Peter J. Albert, \textit{"The Protean Institution: The Geography, Economy, and Ideology of Slavery in Post-Revolutionary Virginia,"} (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1976). See also, Gregory D. Massey, \textit{"The Limits of Antislavery Thought in the Revolutionary Lower South: John Laurens and Henry Laurens,"} \textit{Journal of Southern History} 63 (August 1997), 495-530; Alexander O. Boulton, \textit{"The American Paradox: Jeffersonian Equality and Racial Science,"} \textit{American Quarterly} 47 (September 1995), 467-92.}

In Virginia, no author did more to popularize a pragmatic approach to the slavery issue, as well as the idea of biological determinism, than Thomas Jefferson, whose \textit{Notes on the State of Virginia} began to circulate privately in 1785 before being published in England by John Stockdale in 1787. A standard text at the College of William and Mary during Coles's tenure in Williamsburg, Jefferson's \textit{Notes} praised the American landscape as particularly suitable for republican society. To preserve this condition, Jefferson recommended the eventual eradication of slavery, a system he described as a "great
political and moral evil." He warned, however, that the "Deep prejudices entertained by
the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained"
precluded the preservation of a harmonious social order after emancipation if the newly-
freed blacks remained in America. He also suggested that the inferiority of the black race,
whose "imagination is wild and extravagant, [and which] escapes incessantly from every
restraint of reason and taste," further prevented them from participating in American
society as equals. Emancipation, then, was only practical and proper when it would not
disrupt the harmony of American society. Therefore, he could only support a program
that included the eventual removal of those set at liberty. In 1806, the Virginia legislature
passed a law that reflected, at least in part, Jefferson's view of the situation. To
discourage philanthropic slaveowners from emancipating their chattel property and
thereby endangering the Old Dominion's social order, the new law required all
emancipated blacks to leave the state within one year or risk re-enslavement.\(^{43}\)

Nevertheless, Coles cast aside the predictions and warnings issued by Jefferson, his
Albemarle County neighbor and a close family friend, the arguments offered by Bishop
Madison, and the example of national precedent, insisting that he remained unable to
tolerate "a state of things which was in direct violation of... [our] great fundamental
doctrines." Relying on Rousseau, who claimed that individual conscience was the final
arbiter of good moral behavior, he maintained that he was "unable to screen my self..."
from the peltings & upbraidings of my own conscience... [and] could not consent to hold as property what I had no right to, & which was not, and could not be property, according to my understanding of the rights & duties of man.” Apparently, Bishop Madison’s decision to assign political and moral authors that encouraged readers to challenge authority and think for themselves led at least one student to the radical conclusion that “I would not & could not hold my fellow-man as a Slave.”

Edward Coles’s tenure at the College of William and Mary, and particularly his exposure to the more radical political theorists and moral philosophers of the Scottish Common Sense School, dramatically influenced his vision of the world around him and his understanding of his future role within it. Like most William and Mary graduates, he left Williamsburg convinced he possessed all the qualities necessary to claim membership among the next generation of “natural aristocrats” who would be responsible for securing the survival of the republican experiment. As Joseph Carrington Cabell observed, the educational experience of the students at the college would ensure that “some young men among us who are amiable and sensible... will probably make a considerable figure in life.” Likewise, Coles and his fellow-collegians firmly believed they would accomplish their charge by promoting a particularly Jeffersonian vision of the nation’s future, a program that rested on the cultivation of a virtuous citizenry of economically independent and politically free men. For Coles in particular, however, the production of a harmonious republican social order required the elimination of slavery, a conviction that would

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"Coles, “Autobiography,” April 1844, Edward Coles Collection, HSP."
influence many of the decisions he would make for the rest of his life. In June 1807, just one month before his final examinations, Edward Coles returned home to his family estate, Enniscorthy, in Albemarle County, Virginia. His father and brother Tucker were “very unwell” and they required Coles’s assistance overseeing the harvest. “As I do expect you will be a farmer,” his father declared, “it will be necessary to attend something to the business.” After a summer of helping with the management of the plantation, the twenty-one year old Coles spent most of the fall and early winter exploring his career options, all the while restraining himself “from avowing fully & openly” his opposition to slavery. He also augmented the liberal education he had acquired at the College of William and Mary by regularly visiting James Monroe’s Ashland plantation, located just a few miles away, where he enjoyed unrestricted access to the future president’s library and engaged in numerous casual conversations about the potential choices he faced. When his father died in February 1808, Coles’s desire to make a final decision about his future could no longer be delayed. Faced with such an important choice, Coles began longing for a simpler, less troubled, past. With little to look forward to except solitary walks to inspect the progress of his father’s plantation, the knowledge that Rock Fish farm, the plantation he would inherit, was burdened with debt, and the complicated problem of slavery, Coles complained to a fellow-collegian that he suffered “a sad & melancholy reverse ever since I left Wmsburg, that Paradise of modern times” and

4Joseph Shelton Watson to David Watson, October 26, 1801, “Letters from William and Mary,” VMHB 29 (April 1921), 156-57; Joseph C. Cabell to Dr. William B. Hare, January 4, 1801, “Glimpses of Old College Life,” WMQ 1st Ser. 8 (April 1900), 215.

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that only news of the happiness of his college friends could relieve "my perturbed & agitated soul."\textsuperscript{46}

Many of Coles's fellow collegians shared his dismal description of life after college. Like Coles, they too longed for the excitement and social intercourse of their college days. Writing to his friend David Watson, Joseph Carrington Cabell admitted that "as you have already felt, it is useless for me to describe the emotion that attended my exit from the walls of College. You know what it is," he continued, "to have exchanged the society of congenial souls for the peaceful but chilling prospect of a sequestered country seat." When faced with the prospect of leaving Williamsburg, another student bemoaned "how different is this state of retirement and seclusion from Society, from that Gaiety and myrth which Williamsburg affords! How painful to behold the gloomy prospect which lies before me." While attending the school, many of Virginia's young men participated in a lively student life that confirmed their place among the nation's emerging ruling elite but that disappeared once they returned to the dispersed seats of their family plantations.\textsuperscript{47}

For Coles, the isolation of a residence on his family estate was even more troubling. Like his fellow-graduates, he was determined to fulfill his destiny by assuming a position of influence and authority in the new nation. Yet, his determination to emancipate his enslaved inheritance complicated his efforts to accomplish that goal and


\textsuperscript{47}Joseph C. Cabell to David Watson, June 7, 1799, "Letters to David Watson," \textit{VMHB} 29 (July 1921), 261-65; Carter Henry Harrison to David Watson, June 11, 1797 and Benjamin Howard to David Watson, July 14, 1797, "Letters from William and Mary," \textit{VMHB} 30 (July 1922), 227 and 229.
threatened to undermine the legitimacy of his claim to authority in a republic ruled by slaveholders and pragmatists. His educational background and commitment to natural rights ideology demanded that he liberate his chattel property, but, when he informed his family and friends soon after his father’s death that he intended to manumit his bound laborers, he encountered strong opposition. “All,” revealed Coles, “disapproved & endeavored to reason me out of this determination.” They offered many of “the usual arguments in favor of slavery.” When these general arguments failed to dissuade him, Coles’s siblings changed tactics and focused on the personal consequences of their brother’s decision. They reminded him that he had “no profession” other than “the occupation of a planter; how,” they asked, “can you carry on your plantation, & support yourself, without Slaves?” They insisted that just as it would be impossible for a tradesman to perform his craft without his tools, so too would it be impossible “for a Virginian to be an agriculturalist without owning or employing Slaves.”

They continued their assault by suggesting that, as the fifth of ten children, he had inherited “barely enough to enable you to live as a gentleman, even with your Slaves.” Emancipate the most valuable portion of his inheritance, they declared, and Coles would destroy any hope for a secure and productive future. Coles acknowledged every argument they offered, confessing that he was “fully sensible . . . of the inconveniences & privations I shall subject myself to.” He responded, however, with the same arguments he offered.

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proclaimed to Bishop Madison. “[A]ll of this is as dust in the balance,” he declared, “when weighing the consolation & happiness of doing what you believe right.” His conscience, he insisted, would not allow him to continue to hold men in bondage, a condition that deprived them “of the greatest of all earthly blessings, the enjoyment of . . . liberty, that liberty,” he maintained, “which we are taught to believe is the gift of God, & the inherent & inalienable right of man.”* Although his commitment to freedom was stronger than ever, Coles remained unsure how to honor his convictions while simultaneously fulfilling his responsibility to promote the development of a stable republican social order.

In an effort to resolve this dilemma, Coles explored a variety of career options. Initially, he flirted with the idea of becoming a physician. A few months after his father’s death, he informed Frederick Campbell, a college friend, that “[i]t was my intention to study medicine. . . . [B]ut, as soon as I ascertained [sic] positively that my breast was effected,” he declared, “I immediately delayed . . . believing it was the most pernicious course possible.” When his foray into the field of medicine failed to resolve his dilemma, he experimented with a plan to remain in Virginia, retaining his chattel property as “labourers on my Farm” where he would have “considered & treated them as hirelings.” Although Virginia law required every emancipated slave to leave the state within a year or risk re-enslavement, Coles hoped to avoid this restriction by “not having the free papers recorded, & by making my Will supply any defect in form.” Several prominent Virginians, Robert Pleasants, Robert Carter and George Washington among them, had pursued similar

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*Coles, “Autobiography,” April 1844, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.
paths with some success.  

Yet, when he informed his family and friends of his intentions, they immediately objected to the plan. They assured him that if he implemented his proposal he “should not only incur the displeasure of my relations & neighbors, but I, and my poor unfortunate Negroes, would be considered and treated as pests of society.” Probably as a result of their objections, Coles’s experiment never came to pass. Unable to free his slaves and remain in Virginia, Coles then concluded that he “could do better for myself, & for the Negroes, to remove & take them with me to the Country North West of the Ohio River,” where he could emancipate them without opposition. Accordingly, in August 1809, he embarked on a four month tour of the Ohio River Valley, “exploring a great part of Ohio and Indiana,” as well as Kentucky. Satisfied with his decision to move to the Old Northwest when he returned to Virginia in December 1809, Coles “advertised my land for sale.” Unfavorable economic conditions occasioned by the Jeffersonian embargoes and the threat of war with Great Britain, however, prevented him from “effect[ing] a sale” and Coles was once again, stranded in Virginia without a career and unable to follow through

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with his conviction to emancipate his enslaved property.51

Nearly four years to the day since he wandered down Duke of Gloucester Street observing with disappointment a town and college for which he had great expectations, Edward Coles endured another dreary winter alone and discouraged about his future prospects. Just two and a half years earlier he had heeded his father’s call and returned to Enniscorthy harboring the idealistic notion that he would soon have the opportunity to follow through with his new-found conviction to emancipate his enslaved property and thereby free himself to pursue a career beyond his family’s plantation. To his dismay, the completion of this task proved more difficult than he ever imagined. Little did he know, however, but another equally enticing alternative career choice was about to surface, further exposing the tension he already felt between his conviction to liberate his enslaved property and his desire to serve his nation with distinction.

CHAPTER 2

"A struggle between my inclinations and my reason": Politics, Society, and Public Authority in Washington City

On a cold winter morning in January 1810, Edward Coles sat at a desk in the library at Enniscorthy, his family’s estate in Albemarle County, Virginia. As he considered how best to respond to President James Madison’s request that he serve as his private secretary, the young Virginian recalled the many evenings Madison, Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe had joined his father and brothers to discuss politics and farming in that very room. These men were among the most politically powerful in the nation, the American Republic’s first generation of natural aristocrats, and intimate family friends. Consequently, Coles relished the opportunity to join Madison’s presidential family. "Nothing has ever more flattered my vanity, or given me more gratification," wrote Coles, "than this token of your esteem and confidence in me."¹

Still, although he coveted the society that would accompany a residence in Washington City and remained determined to pursue any career other than that of a planter, Coles hesitated to accept the tempting offer. Just a few weeks earlier, he had returned from a tour of Kentucky and the Ohio River Valley, where he was considering

relocating himself and the enslaved laborers he planned to liberate. Indeed, Coles had recently advertised his seven hundred and forty-seven acre plantation for sale in preparation for a westward move. Madison’s timely offer, then, caused Coles to “feel sensibly a struggle between my inclinations and my reason.”

Coles immediately recognized the significance of the dilemma before him. He knew from his College reading of Cicero’s *De Officiis* that a young man’s choice of career was “the most difficult problem in the world.” In that work, Cicero employed the myth of Hercules to demonstrate that the decisions a young man made as he entered adulthood would define his character and reputation, determine the legitimacy of his claim to authority, for the remainder of his life. Like Hercules, Coles was “now becoming [his] . . . own master” and his choice of occupation would “show whether [he would] . . . approach life by the path of virtue or the path of vice.” The path of vice tempted young men to pursue the easy way of indolence and pleasure, to abandon the moderation and restraint they had learned at college in favor of pursuing their own pleasure and self-interest. The path of vice called on these emerging young adults to take the difficult, but eventually more rewarding, path of duty and honor, of sacrificing their own self-interest in favor of serving the common good. Bishop Madison hoped, as did most parents and students alike, that those who passed through the College of William and Mary would follow Hercules’s lead and proceed deliberately and confidently down the path of virtue.  

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As Coles discovered while contemplating how to answer Madison, however, determining which selection represented the path of virtue was not always very easy. Both of the choices before Coles exhibited characteristics from each path. He understood, for example, that resettling on the frontier would require him to abandon his native state and the genteel life-style he cherished. Additionally, by emancipating his enslaved inheritance, he severely compromised his financial standing. Still, by immigrating westward and liberating his chattel property he would sacrifice his own interest and contribute to the creation of a republic without slavery.

Similarly, he recognized that accepting Madison’s offer would require him to suppress his opposition to slavery, to sacrifice his personal convictions so he could fulfill his generational obligation to serve his nation. Yet, by moving to Washington City, he knew he would be able to maintain his status as an elite by joining a cosmopolitan community that surpassed anything he had experienced in Williamsburg. Neither selection, then, fit neatly the dichotomy Cicero presented to his readers. In the end, Coles decided to follow the dictates of his reason, and informed President Madison that he would have to decline “to accept a place . . . in the bosom of a family for whom I have the greatest respect.” More than anything, Coles felt sure his decision reflected his training at the College of William and Mary, training which had prepared him to choose virtue over vice, to privilege the common good over self-interest.4

On his way to the post office, however, Coles encountered his neighbor and good friend James Monroe, who discouraged him from sending the letter. As Coles recalled

4Edward Coles to James Madison, January 8, 1810, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.
many years later, Monroe "urged me by all means to accept; that it was the most desirable situation in the world for a young man, . . . one in which I would derive more useful information than in any other." From Monroe's perspective, Coles could accomplish the virtuous components of each selection by concluding to accept Madison's offer. He maintained that by moving to Washington City, Coles could prepare himself more thoroughly for his western move. "[I]t was particularly desireable," argued Monroe, that Coles "associate with non-slaveholding people and form acquaintances with Members of Congress" from the Old Northwest. Still, his "anxiety to sell my Farm, . . . & as soon as possible to restore to my Negroes their liberty," led Coles to resist Monroe's advice. Only after the future president urged Coles to reconsider his decision, repeatedly emphasizing how a temporary sojourn in Washington would ease his transition to the frontier, did Coles capitulate and accept Madison's offer.  

Coles entered the nation's capital at the height of the city's social season. Every winter, members of Congress, foreign ministers and other prominent men, along with their wives and children, descended upon the federal city. Eager to attend the galleries of Congress as well as to frequent various social events, these transitory residents of Washington City constructed a community of national ruling elites well-known for their conviviality and political character. As one traveler observed, for those "who love dissipation . . . the game of politics . . . and who [wish to] make a study of strong minds under strong excitements," Washington was the place to visit. Although his education at the College of William and Mary had taught him how essential strong social bonds were in

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Coles, "Autobiography," April 1844, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.
a successful Republic, Coles's abstract understanding of the political utility of the art of sociability had not prepared him for the reality of politics as it was practiced by the Madison administration. As Coles soon learned, more than any other location, the President's House, where the Madisons hosted dinner parties, Wednesday drawing rooms and executive levees, was the center of an emerging national political culture that required and elevated individuals who possessed the appropriate habits of civility and who were skilled enough to employ them during social events to shape and define public policy.®

Importantly, as the President's private secretary, Edward Coles played an integral role in aiding Madison's efforts to reshape the nation's political culture. Primarily, he was one of several individuals who established political and social connections and then used them to regulate the circulation of information into and out of the President's House. His official duties required him to oversee the President's correspondence and communications, preside over Presidential dinners and other social events, and attend important social functions on Madison's behalf. Coles cultivated a degree of authority

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among Washingtonians and elites elsewhere that he would not have enjoyed had he either remained a planter in Virginia or relocated to the frontier. By choosing to follow Monroe’s advice, then, Coles established himself as a member of a national political elite. To his dismay, however, rather than relieve the anxiety he had felt ever since leaving Williamsburg, Coles’s tenure as private secretary only increased the already prominent tension he experienced between his heart-felt duty to serve the nation and his unrelenting determination to liberate his enslaved property. Consequently, by the end of the War of 1812, Coles was once again contemplating resettling on the frontier.

Coles arrived in Washington City in the middle of the eleventh congressional session. Like Henry Clay who assumed his position in the Senate at the same time, Coles began his official duties at a particularly contentious point in Madison’s first presidential term. Tensions with Great Britain and France had fluctuated, but seemed constantly on the brink of formal hostilities. The two belligerents had each issued orders prohibiting Americans from trading with their enemies. To enforce their edicts, both France and Great Britain routinely seized American ships. The British also impressed American sailors, claiming that the seamen owed service to the British crown, thereby denying their claims of American citizenship. At the same time, the British navy effectively blockaded the eastern seaboard, challenging any ship that attempted to carry a cargo across the Atlantic. Such behavior angered the American public as well as national leaders and few
could deny that Congress and the Executive would have to respond.²

Initially, the United States attempted to remain aloof from the conflicts brewing between England and France by occupying a middle ground that preserved the nation’s right to free trade while simultaneously maintaining political neutrality. By the winter of 1810, however, years of pursuing a policy of economic coercion and commercial restraint had failed to improve the situation or alleviate the anger of the American public. Still, the nation’s political leadership had yet to determine the course of action to pursue next. “It has been my own opinion ever since the meeting of Congress,” declared Coles, “that, that body is not now for war.” Instead, Congress was divided into several factions who advocated a variety of different approaches to the intensifying international crisis. Some leaders, claimed Coles, were “for patching the old intercourse law, which is found to be leaky.” Others sought to substitute “some similar machine in its place.” Still others, Henry Clay most prominently, advocated a more aggressive response, earning the nickname of “War Hawks” for their outspoken and determined call for military action.*

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The inability of the members of Congress to agree on a specific policy, but, more significantly, the failure of the Republican foreign policy agenda in general, caused conflicts to erupt within the Republican party and fueled the resurgence of the Federalist opposition. From within his own party, Madison faced opposition from the Virginia Quids, who behind the leadership of John Randolph repeatedly ridiculed both the President and his policies. One congressman observed that Randolph, a fellow Virginian and one-time political ally of Madison's, frequently "came out ... in a most bitter philippic against the President and the Secretary of State." He also encountered the anti-administration sentiment expressed by Senators Michael Leib and Samuel Smith, and New York Governor DeWitt Clinton. These "Malcontents," as they were often called, transformed the usually secure Republican strongholds of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New York into doubtful sources of support for the administration. As one ardent Federalist observed, "many of the members styled democrats, like ... Merino sheep, are some two thirds and other not more than half blooded and often vote with us."9

The Madison administration intended to cultivate the support of and ameliorate factional divisions among the nation's political elite by constructing a national political culture that would ensure the development of a harmonious republican society, a goal familiar to Coles given his educational background. To accomplish his task, Madison, with the aid of Coles, orchestrated and hosted presidential dinners, weekly levees, and various public celebrations. Together with Dolley Payne Todd Madison, Coles and Madison increased the political significance of social events, and, in the process, constructed a political style that occupied a middle ground between the democratic simplicity of Thomas Jefferson and the excessive luxury and arrogance displayed by George Washington's administration in the 1790s. As a result, Madisonian social occasions were accessible and familiar in a fashion consistent with a democratic republic, yet were also formal engagements appropriate to the status of enlightened elite rulers of a nation. The innovations in political style introduced by the Madison administration expanded the political sphere beyond official circles to include social gatherings in which men and women of opposing views could meet more informally to discuss and, potentially, resolve their political differences. In this way, the Madison administration attempted to

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Shulman, "Dolley (Payne Todd) Madison;" Allgor, Parlor Politics, 94-99. The Madison administration was not the first to recognize the potential political power of social and public spaces. See Newman, Parades and the Politics of the Street, 44-82; David Waldstreicher, "Federalism, the Styles of Politics, and the Politics of Style," in Federalists Reconsidered, edited by Doron Ben-Altar and Barbara B. Oberg (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998); Waldstreicher, In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes, 1-173. See also Andre W. Robertson, "'Look on This Picture... And on This!': Nationalism, Localism, and Partisan Images of Otherness in the United States, 1787-1820," American Historical Review 106 (October 2001), 1263-80, especially 1268-69, and Morales Vaquez, "Monuments, Markets, and Manners," 61-112. See also David S. Shields and Fredrika J. Teute, "Jefferson in Washington: Domesticating the Manners of the Republican Court," (Paper presented at the Institute of Early American History and Culture, June 1997).
overcome the political liabilities imposed by the divisive character of the Washington community.

As the President's private secretary, Coles witnessed firsthand the difficulties Madison faced and participated directly in his efforts to resolve the conflicts that surrounded him. He frequently attended important political discussions hosted by the President, and as one of the few residents of Washington who enjoyed unlimited access to Madison, Coles also served as a purveyor of information, often engaging in conversations with different members of Congress and various foreign ministers at Madison's direction. Like the congressional agents who sponsored and advocated administration policy in Congress during Jefferson's administration, Coles was an executive agent who possessed the knowledge and authority to speak on behalf of the President when the occasion demanded. Perhaps most significantly, his training at the College of William and Mary made him predisposed to recognize the significance of the Madison administration's efforts to forge the common bonds of affection necessary to create a unified republican society.11

Among his official responsibilities, Coles received, cataloged, and organized the President's correspondence. A few weeks after he arrived in Washington City, Madison gave Coles "two handkerchiefs stuffed full of papers" and instructed him to arrange them. "He has requested me to class in alphabetical order all his letters," revealed Coles, "which

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he says is a work that will require no small quantity of labour or time.” Coles was most busy during the middle of the congressional session. In the fall of 1810, for example, he informed his brother that he expected “the P - T [to] come in with his hands full of papers, which, I learn, will give me constant employment until Monday.”12 As he performed his day-to-day activities, Coles became intimately familiar with the political demands placed on Madison, the dissatisfaction of the executive’s detractors, as well as the President’s position on the important issues of the day.

He was also responsible for delivering all the communications between the President and Congress. Occasionally, he carried collections of documents or informal notes to particular members of the legislature. More often than not, however, he delivered official messages from the President that were then read before Congress. Initially, he described this task as “that ordeal of embarrassment.” Undoubtedly, many members of Congress associated him with his older brother Isaac, who resigned the secretaryship in late December 1809 after attacking a member in the name of honor. His brother’s behavior and the formal investigation of the events leading to his resignation severely damaged the bond between the executive and the legislature and hampered Coles’s ability to fulfill his responsibilities as the President’s secretary. To alleviate the tensions he inherited, Coles eagerly attended the various social events in the city where he introduced himself to the members of Congress. In this way, he sought to demonstrate that he possessed the proper habits of civility, that he shared the communally established code of

12Edward Coles to Mother & Sisters, February 4, 1810 and November 30, 1810, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.
proper moral behavior. More than anything, he intended to distinguish himself from his older brother who seemed to allow his passions to overwhelm his moderation. Through social interaction, as he had learned at the College of William and Mary, Coles forged the bonds of affection that ensured his membership in the Washington community and allowed him to perform his professional responsibilities more easily.\(^\text{13}\)

While his mastery of the art of sociability ensured a smooth entrance into Washington society and restored the lines of communication between the President and Congress, Coles’s habits of civility also allowed him to exercise considerable political power. As he explained to his mother and sisters, in addition to collecting and organizing the President’s correspondence and delivering messages to Congress, he frequently “presided . . . as master of ceremonies” at official and informal dinners. Jonathan Roberts, a Republican representative from Pennsylvania, remarked that, “the members of Congress, are invited to dine with the President in detail. The table would hold about thirty guests,” he continued, which generally included “a mixture of parties and locations.” Roberts also noted that “Mrs. Madison always [sat at] . . . the head of the table,” Edward Coles “at the foot & the President took some convenient seat” in between. In this way, Coles and Dolley controlled the flow of the conversation and occasionally deferred to the President, who strategically selected a seat nearest those with whom he needed to discuss

\(^\text{13}\)Edward Coles to Mother & Sisters, February 4, 1810, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. See also, Edward Coles to Brother [John], February 3, 1810, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. On the circumstances surrounding Isaac Coles’s resignation, see Isaac A. Coles to James Madison, December 29, 1809, Edward Coles Papers, Chicago Historical Society (hereafter CHS); Isaac A. Coles to Brother [John], January 8, 1810, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. See also editorial note in J. C. A. Stagg, et al., eds., *The Papers of James Madison*, Presidential Series, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), II: 151. For contemporary reports of the investigation of the incident, see *Annals of Congress* 11 Congress 2nd Session, 685, 705, 987-88.
important matters.  

Even when the President's dinner companions were limited to the members of the presidential family, the conversations invariably turned to politics. After he observed the activities of the legislature from the galleries of Congress, for example, Coles "would repeat to" Madison the content of the most effective speeches. On several occasions, he reported on the "violent speech of some northern man or a short sarcasm of [John] Randolph." William C. Preston, another young Virginian who frequently stayed at the President's House, observed that Madison expected those who attended meals at the executive's house to provide him with important information otherwise unavailable to him. "He enquired of his brother-in-law, Mr. [Richard] Cutts," a congressman from Massachusetts, "the news of the day, the proceedings of Congress, the audits, and seemed especially interested to know what Chief-Justice Marshall said and did." When he was not acting as master of ceremonies at official dinners, Coles helped the President obtain the most up-to-date information on the extent and content of opposition to his administration.  

The political power of dinner parties extended beyond the executive's residence as well. Coles disclosed to his brother that each week he attended a "number of dinner parties . . . I have not dined at home in a family way," he continued, "more than three times in the last fortnight." While some of the invitations Coles received and accepted

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were purely social, others came from individuals seeking insight into administration policy. Julien Poydras, the congressional delegate from the Territory of Orleans, for example, “insisted” that Coles dine “with him every Sunday.” Poydras, who vigorously supported his territory’s desire for statehood, undoubtedly viewed Coles as both a source of information and a potential advocate who might expedite his efforts to transform Louisiana into the newest member of the American union. British Minister Sir Augustus John Foster likewise recognized the importance of hosting dinner parties. He admitted that he “had to give dinners three or four times a week” if he intended to remain well-informed of or shape government attitudes toward his nation, especially when “questions of peace and war were debating.” Like Madison and other Washingtonians, he invited various representatives, executive officers and staff members, Coles among them, to dinner “to keep a constant and friendly connection with as many Members of Congress and public men as possible.”

Coles was also expected to attend and facilitate the exchange of information at executive levees and drawing room parties. At these events, he often greeted guests once they were escorted into the drawing room of the President’s House. He then regulated access to Madison by ushering forward those the President wished to see and diverting

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Edward Coles to Brother [John], November 30, 1810, Edward Coles Collection, HSP; Richard Beale Davis, ed., Jeffersonian America: Notes on the United States of America Collected in the Years 1805-6-7 and 11-12 by Sir Augustus John Foster, Bart. (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1954), 86. See also Allgor, Parlor Politics, 48-101. In early January 1812, as the nation debated the preparations for war, Foster invited the members of Congress, and Federalists in particular, to a dinner party, hoping the social occasion would provide some insight into the direction of American foreign policy and the extent of support for formal hostilities. “I have received an invitation,” reported Abijah Bigelow, “to attend a large evening party at the British Minister’s, consisting of most of the members. I have not made up my mind to go,” he continued, but “if my mess generally attend, I probably shall.” See Bigelow to Bigelow, January 16, 1812, “Letters of Abijah Bigelow,” 325.

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away others by involving them in conversations with other guests. “Mr. Madison,” observed one attendee, “had no leisure for the ladies; every moment of his time,” she proclaimed, “is engrossed by the crowd of male visitors who court his notice.” After paying heed to the ladies, it was Coles who directed the President toward the other guests so that “his attention is unavoidably withdrawn to more important subjects.” Held weekly, usually on Wednesday evenings, the presidential levees, or drawing rooms, attracted crowds of people, men and women alike, who, like presidential dinner guests, came to socialize and conduct business with men of importance and authority, and in the process, announced their membership in a national governing aristocracy.17

Political leaders also attended the levees to discuss public business with one another and Coles frequently monitored the content of the conversations. The chairman of the committee of foreign relations and ardent Madison supporter, Peter B. Porter of New York, for example, attended the President’s levee to gauge the congressional response to several resolutions he had introduced in the House of Representatives. As one spectator observed, Porter “offered certain resolutions which have a war like appearance. . . . A war with England seems almost inevitable,” she concluded, “and I should not be surprised if congress should resort to such measures.” Porter, however, did not share this Washingtonian’s confidence, and arrived at the President’s House determined to canvass attendants for their views and pressure representatives into supporting his measure. James Milnor, a Federalist from Pennsylvania, claimed that the chairman “made . . . three

enquiries of me at the levee last evening.” Unwilling to be pressured, Milnor confessed that “I gave him suitable answers.” Undoubtedly, Coles made sure Madison was fully aware of the level of support measures such as the resolutions Porter introduced attracted.

As he became increasingly adept at manipulating social gatherings to gather and distribute important information, Coles discovered perhaps the most valuable characteristic of the political culture he was helping to create. Unlike in the colonial period when an individual’s public authority was linked to his local community, political power in the Early Republic was becoming increasingly portable. During the summer of 1811, for example, Coles and his older brother John embarked on a northern tour that included sojourns in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, Albany, New Port, Boston, and Portland. The timing of the trip was particularly fortuitous, and perhaps purposeful, because American relations with Great Britain and France had deteriorated significantly and factional opposition to the administration threatened the President’s re-election. Over the preceding year both European nations refused to lift their trade restrictions against the United States and efforts to increase America’s military preparedness had failed to bring either belligerent to the negotiating table.

Simultaneously, while congressional War Hawks increasingly demanded a military response to British insults on the Atlantic and in the West, Federalists and anti-

\*\*Catharine Mitchell to Sister [Margaret], April 8, 1806 and December 7, 1811, Catharine Mitchell Papers, Library of Congress; James Milnor to Thomas Bradford, Jr., December 12, 1811, James Milnor Papers, Library of Congress. Robert Bailey, who was visiting the city in December 1811, similarly recognized the importance of social space. “The house,” he observed, “was taken up in the discussion of a resolution for raising an army. . . . It is the general opinion,” he continued, “that war is inevitable.” His information was reliable, he maintained, because he had acquired it at “Mrs. Madison’s levee, where I viewed all the great men of the nation.” Robert Bailey to John Payne, December 14, 1811, The Papers of John Payne, Library of Congress.
administration Republicans voiced their dissatisfaction with Madison and continually blocked his legislative efforts to prepare for war. Perhaps most disconcerting for the President, Madison had been forced to dismiss his Secretary of State, Robert Smith, for betraying him by leaking valuable information to the administration’s political enemies and the President feared that the ensuing newspaper battle between Smith and administration loyalists would undermine his credibility. Coles’s northern tour, then, provided the President with a unique opportunity to gauge the region’s attitude toward the administration, his re-election, and the possibility of war with Great Britain.  

Coles’s value as an informant was never more clear than when he stopped in Baltimore and spent several days visiting with Samuel Smith’s family. “I was treated civilly by them [the Smiths],” Coles reported, but “their displeasure with the President . . . was very apparent.” Even more troubling, however, was Coles’s discovery that, while they “are said not directly to vent their spleen,” the Smiths “spur[red] on their relations & friends, many of whom are extremely abusive of the President.” As proof, Coles revealed that “those abusive & scurrilous pieces signed Temolian,” in the Baltimore Whig, “are now publicly known . . . to be from the pen of George Stevenson, . . . the nephew of

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19Edward Coles to Brother [John], January 28, 1811, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU; Edward Coles to Brother [John], March 18, 1811, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. See also “Autobiographical Notes,” 1863, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. On American relations with Great Britain and France during this period, see Perkins, Prologue to War; Egan, Neither Peace Nor War; and Stagg, Mr. Madison’s War. On Robert Smith’s intrigues, see James A. Rutland, Presidency of James Madison (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 74; Ketcham, James Madison, 484-87; and Thom M. Armstrong, Politics, Diplomacy and Intrigue in the Early Republic: The Cabinet Career of Robert Smith, 1801-1811 (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1991). For the newspaper battle, see National Intelligencer, April 25, 1811; Robert Smith, Address to the People of the United States (United States, s.n., 1811); National Intelligencer, July 4, 6, and 9, August 13 and 15, 1811; and Joseph Gales, “Recollections of the Civil History of the War of 1812,” Daily National Intelligencer, August 8, 1857. See also, Stagg, Mr. Madison’s War, 68-74.
Smith.” Coles concluded his report, stating: “I have said too much about this little clan, whose vanity or weakness is such, as to make them believe that they can make & unmake any administration.”

Similarly, Coles found that opposition to the Madison administration in the Mid-Atlantic and New England, among Republicans and Federalists alike, remained strong. As he socialized with Dr. Benjamin Rush and Dr. Caspar Wistar in Philadelphia, Coles learned even more about the anti-administration sentiments of men such as William Duane, editor of the *Aurora Gazette Advertiser* and Senator Michael Leib. While in Boston, a hotbed of Federalist opposition, his stays with Governor Elbridge Gerry and future senator Robert C. Winthrop confirmed the growing strength of Federalist animosity toward the administration. Yet, the trip also reassured the President of the loyalty of Gerry, who received Coles and eagerly provided him with information. As had become clear during his visit to Baltimore, Coles uncovered pockets of opposition to the President and his

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administration wherever he traveled and as he attempted to repair damaged relationships among those he visited by relaying information back and forth, he also learned the extent of his influence outside Washington City.\(^{21}\)

Nearly two years later, Coles once again deployed his skills in the art of sociability to transform seemingly superficial social contacts into important resources for information. As Madison’s two-day celebration of his second inauguration came to a close in early March 1813, Coles’s previously annoying case of hemorrhoids worsened dramatically forcing him to leave Washington City. After a short visit to his family estate in Virginia failed to relieve his symptoms, Coles traveled to Philadelphia to benefit from the care of the aptly named Dr. Philip S. Physick, a close friend of Dolley Madison.\(^{22}\)

Coles feared his departure from the nation’s capital was particularly poorly timed. Just weeks before, Madison had called for a special session of Congress and scheduled the opening day for the first of May. As he had endured throughout his first term, Madison faced considerable opposition in Congress. Yet, aware that he could benefit from the Republican majority in the House of Representatives, Madison hoped to use the special session to resolve the financial problems that had heretofore hindered his ability to prosecute the war. He also knew that anti-administration Republicans and Federalists in

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\(^{21}\)Regarding who and where Coles visited, see James Monroe to Edward Coles, May 19 and 25, 1811, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU; “Autobiographical Notes,” 1863, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. ON Republican disunity in Pennsylvania, New York, and Maryland, see J. C. A. Stagg, “James Madison and the ‘Malcontents,’; The Political Origins of the War of 1812,” William and Mary Quarterly 3rd Ser. 33 (October 1976), 61-63; Stagg, Mr. Madison’s War, 48-53

\(^{22}\)Edward Coles to Brother [John], March 28, 1813, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. Dolley Payne Todd Madison was intimate friends with Dr. Physick, who had treated many patients during the 1792 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia that claimed the life of her first husband, John Todd.

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the Senate remained determined to thwart his efforts. Simultaneously, Madison had accepted an offer from the Russian government to mediate a peace conference and was eager to appoint a delegation to travel overseas. With so many measures on the administration’s agenda, Coles feared that his departure from the capital would hamper the President’s ability to accomplish his goals.23

Little did Coles know, but his temporary residence in Philadelphia would prove equally, if not more advantageous, to the administration than if he had returned to the federal city. As he had learned during his northern tour two years earlier, his political authority extended beyond the boundaries of the nation’s capital, for the social bonds he had forged during his day-to-day responsibilities in Washington City continued to hold sway wherever he traveled. After nearly a month recuperating in Philadelphia, for example, Coles attended “a grand party at Mr. [Alexander] Dallas’ in the company of Mr. Albert Gallatin & Mr. [James A.] Bayard,” who were the most prominent members of the delegation charged with negotiating a peace settlement with Great Britain. By attending the gathering, Coles could inform Madison of the public reception of his decision to pursue a diplomatic resolution to the international conflict as well as the hopes and fears of the members of the delegation. He also regularly visited “with . . . Members of Congress who spent their recess” in Philadelphia, and thereby kept Madison abreast of the opinions and potential opposition of those who would be deciding the fate of the war effort during the upcoming congressional session. Still, although he recognized the importance of his sojourn in Philadelphia, Coles envied the ability of the congressmen to

23Ketcham, James Madison, 558-62.
return to Washington and, as he confessed, their departure “made him impatient to leave” Philadelphia.24

Hoping to allay her cousin’s anxiety, Dolley Madison assured Coles that “Mr. M can do very well without a Secey. until your health is re-established.” There were several other individuals whose political and social contacts in Washington City would serve as an adequate, though not necessarily perfect, substitute for the ailing Coles. Dolley herself expanded the role she already played during presidential dinners and levees to include some of the more mundane tasks Coles had performed for the President. Additionally, John E. Eppes, the new representative from Virginia and an intimate friend of the President, as well as Madison’s brother-in-law, Kentucky representative John G. Jackson, provided Madison with regular reports on the proceedings in Congress.25

None of these individuals nor anyone else, however, could furnish the President with intelligence on some of his most vociferous political enemies outside the capital. In late May, when the President was engrossed in an effort to resolve the nation’s financial problems, Coles informed Madison that the “opposition party” was exerting considerable influence in the Philadelphia region and warned that their activities may have compromised the loyalties of at least one member of the President’s cabinet. He disclosed that “a good deal of feeling has been excited here by some military appointments, made during the present recess of the Senate. I consider it my duty” he continued, “to give [you] some

24Edward Coles to Mother, May 3 and May 26, 1813, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.

facts, and a hint of an impression which prevails with some of the best friends of the State and General Government.” Apparently to the dismay of many of the President’s supporters, the followers of Senator Michael Leib, an active member of the “Malcontents,” had been slyly placing individuals opposed to the administration in important military posts. The ease with which they accomplished the appointments, warned Coles, had created “an impression . . . with many that the Secretary of War thinks too highly of [William] Duane and his friends, and suffer them to have too much influence over him.” Coles probably feared that Madison risked an administrative disaster akin to Robert Smith’s betrayal two years earlier and hoped to inform the President of a potential vulnerability in his cabinet.26

The information Coles supplied was particularly important because, throughout the spring and summer of 1813, most Republicans agreed that new taxes were needed, but as the congressional session progressed it became clear that they disagreed on the objects to be taxed, how to distribute the burden geographically, and feared the political consequences of their actions. Simultaneously, congressional Federalists log-jammed governmental proceedings by initiating an investigation of Madison’s diplomatic actions and challenging his appointments to the peace mission charged with the responsibility of resolving the conflict with Great Britain. Any information that could aid Madison in his efforts to identify the sources of and overcome his opposition, then, proved invaluable.27

26Edward Coles to James Madison, May 22, 1813, Edward Coles Papers, CHS. William Duane joined the Madison opponents known as the “Malcontents” in open opposition to Albert Gallatin. As the editor of the Philadelphia Aurora, Duane could promote opposition to the administration easily and, therefore, posed a considerable threat to Madison at a very crucial period in the war.

27Stagg, Mr. Madison’s War, 304-18; Rutland, Presidency of James Madison, 129-31.
Despite all their efforts, Coles and the Madisons never really succeeded in creating a harmonious political community in Washington City or the nation as a whole. Throughout Madison’s tenure in office the persistence of factional conflict impeded the effectiveness of the administration and Congress. As Coles informed his close friend Nicholas Biddle in January 1815, a contentious Congress dominated by divided interests and violent anti-administration sentiment continued to hold the President and his policies hostage. “[T]he proceedings of Congress . . . have so completely disgusted and sickened me that I cannot bear to think of them; and [I] feel conscious,” he continued, “that I cannot speak of . . . its dilatory oscillating and inefficient measures, with a suitable temper and moderation.” Three months later, Coles celebrated the return to peace with the Madisons at the President’s House. Although the overwhelming joy and excitement that followed news of the peace settlement in Ghent and Andrew Jackson’s startling victory in New Orleans led many to forget the divisions and conflicts that had severely fractured the Washington political community, few could conclude that the Madison administration had performed well during the international crisis. Indeed, the most prominent lesson Coles learned from his experiences as the President’s private secretary was just how elusive the ideal of a harmonious republican society could be.28

Still, the Madisons and their supporters had succeeded in fostering the development of a national political culture in which private space, and particularly the

28Edward Coles to Nicholas Biddle, January 29, 1815, The Papers of Edward Coles, Illinois State Historical Library; Dolley Payne Todd Madison to Hannah Gallatin, [March 5, 1815], The Dolley Madison Digital Edition. On popular views of Madison’s presidency at the conclusion of the War of 1812, see McCoy, Last of the Fathers, 16-20.
social occasions they showcased, became an essential tool for accomplishing the nation's political business. Coles, who had been introduced to the art of sociability in college, refined his habits of civility in Washington City and developed an intimate understanding of the public authority bestowed on individuals who became adept at deploying their social skills to accomplish their political goals. He also discovered just how transferable this emerging form of public power could be as he traveled up and down the eastern seaboard and across the Atlantic. More than anything, the practical political lessons Coles learned while serving as a member of Madison's presidential family shaped his understanding of public authority and influenced his efforts to elicit respect from those around him for the rest of his life.

Within a month of the conclusion of the war, Coles informed Biddle that he had "left the President with no intention of again returning to reside in his family." He confessed that he was preparing to embark on a second tour of the Old Northwest, where he hoped to select "a spot on which to locate myself for life." Six years earlier he had considered a westward move, but instead accepted Madison's invitation to join him in Washington City. Coles had justified the decision to postpone his removal to the frontier by assuming that the career choice would, while only distancing him from the inherited property that caused him such internal turmoil, provide him with the opportunity to fulfill a generational obligation bestowed on him while a student at the College of William and Mary, a responsibility to ensure the preservation of the American republican experiment. At the time, Coles described the dilemma he had faced as a choice between his inclination and his reason. Once he had chosen to move to Washington City, he hoped that the
conflict between his desire to distinguish himself by serving his nation and his
determination to emancipate his bound laborers would dissipate. To his dismay, the
tension between his “objections to Slavery . . . and my partiality for my relations & friends
. . . still continue[d] to perplex and disturb” him as late as the spring of 1815. Once again,
he faced a choice between remaining in the East where his friends and family resided and
where he could maintain his membership among a national political elite, or move
westward where he could follow through with his conviction to liberate his enslaved
property, but live without the influence and authority that accompanied a residence in the
nation’s capital.29

Most of his family and friends objected to the course of action he contemplated
and attempted to dissuade him. Tench Ringgold, an old college friend and Washington
City businessman, confessed that he did “not wonder at your friends and relations being
averse to your western plans. . . . I still hope,” he continued, “they may prevail on you to
abandon the idea.” He also revealed that Coles’s plans had been the subject of
conversation “last evening with our good friend Colonel [James] Monroe.” Apparently,
Monroe felt the same about Coles’s “intended removal to Ohio” in 1815 as he had six
years earlier. “He disapproves of it in toto,” declared Ringgold. As he had earlier,
Monroe argued that Coles “will not be satisfied . . . to set down in the midst of rough
unpolished people, perfectly uncongenial to you in habits and manners.” Fearful that a
message relayed through Ringgold would not carry the forcefulness he intended, Monroe

29Edward Coles to Nicholas Biddle, April 8, 1815; Edward Coles to RSM [Robert Madison?],
March 31, 1815, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.

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vowed, Ringgold revealed, to travel home "in a few days" to present his arguments in person. Coles confessed to at least one friend that he felt "very forcibly the weight of [these] . . . objections," and like Hercules, "anticipat[d] the many difficulties I shall have to encounter" as he pursued what he believed to be a virtuous path westward. Unlike six years earlier, when Monroe's advice altered his plans, however, Coles insisted that he "could encounter any thing other than hold slaves" and confidently proclaimed that nothing could "induce me to remain among them."30

Rather than temper his abhorrence of slavery, as Monroe and his family had hoped, Coles's residence in Washington City instead intensified his determination to emancipate his chattel property. While he had predicted that his young Virginia neighbor would benefit from forming acquaintances with non-slaveholding political leaders, Monroe hardly anticipated the degree to which Coles would be unable to escape the issue of slavery during his tenure as James Madison's private secretary. Indeed, Coles soon discovered that enslaved laborers were everywhere around him. Throughout his residence in Washington City and Philadelphia, the bound laborers Coles inherited from his father continued to labor on his farm. Like many of his contemporaries who expressed discomfort with the institution, Coles attempted to appease his own misgivings about slavery by treating his enslaved property humanely. "I fed, clothed, & treated my Negroes," declared Coles, "with all the kindness & attention in my power, & introduced several ameliorating alterations to their treatment." Still, they remained enslaved, and

30 Tench Ringgold to Edward Coles, April 23, 1815; Edward Coles to Nicholas Biddle, April 8, 1815, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU. See also Tench Ringgold to Edward Coles, April 12, 1815, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.
Coles routinely instructed both his overseer and his brothers regarding the management of his plantation while he was away from Virginia.31

Coles was also constantly reminded of the inferior condition imposed on bound laborers during his residence in the President’s House, where enslaved labor sustained the ordinary functions of the household. Bound laborers prepared and served the food, cleaned the rooms, greeted visitors, and always stood in the background ready to attend to every need of both the Madisons and their guests. Additionally, throughout his tenure in the nation’s capital, Coles “talked unreservedly” with Madison “about the enslavement of Negroes,” with Coles always insisting that the federal government had a responsibility to facilitate the destruction of the institution.

By the time he assumed the presidency in the spring of 1809, Madison’s actions over the previous thirty-five years had established his public position on the slavery issue. Privately he acknowledged that slavery was wrong and, like many of his fellow Virginians, he feared the unfavorable consequences that would result if the problem remained unresolved. As early as 1791, however, Madison had concluded that any public action against slavery was “likely to do harm rather than good.” He suspected that an unsuccessful bid to end slavery would only strengthen the forces that sought to preserve the institution. Like Jefferson, Madison believed that until popular sentiment for abolition increased, inaction remained the most prudent and practical course available and he

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31 Coles, “Autobiography,” April 1844, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. See also Edward Coles to Brother [John], December 17, 1810; May 6, 1812; November 2, 1814, The Edward Coles Collection, HSP. In 1810, for example, Coles informed his brother that he preferred not to lend his slave, Ralph, to his mother because he feared that she would work him too hard. Coles also often hired slaves to work on his farm from family members and neighbors.
repeated his position on the issue to Coles frequently.\(^{32}\)

Although the President's arguments were unmistakably similar to those he encountered in Williamsburg, Coles remained unconvinced by Madison's rationalizations and continually criticized his mentor in subtle but potentially explosive ways. In private conversations, for example, Coles frequently expressed "my surprise that just men, & long sighted politicians," by whom he undoubtedly meant men like Madison and Jefferson, as well as the members of Congress, "should not as well in reference to the acknowledged rights of man, as to the true & permanent interests of their Country, take the necessary steps to put in train its termination." Clearly, Coles felt that Madison's pragmatic approach to the slavery issue would produce the opposite of what the President intended; rather than preserve the "good," Madison's apathy, Coles believed, threatened to cause more "harm."\(^{33}\)

Coles and Madison also regularly encountered enslaved laborers as they traversed the federal city. Between 1810 and 1820 the slave population in Washington City grew by nearly one-third, increasing from 1,437 to 1,945. These enslaved laborers worked as domestic servants, coachmen, laundresses, cooks, hack drivers, waiters, messengers, and manservants. Occasionally, skilled slaves also worked as blacksmiths, bricklayers and carpenters. Slaves, then, were a very visible component of a diverse labor pool that also


included free blacks and whites. The domestic slave trade, however, was the characteristic of Washington City's slave institution that provoked the most comment by Coles, his fellow residents, and visitors alike. During his tenure in Washington City, Coles complained that he frequently encountered "gangs of Negroes, some in irons, on their way to a Southern market." Unable to resist the temptation, Coles took "the liberty to jeer" Madison "by congratulating him, as the chief of our great Republic," that a foreign dignitary had not accompanied them on their strolls. In this way, Coles teased the President by celebrating that the leader of the new Republic had been "saved" from experiencing "the deep mortification of witnessing such a revolting sight in the presence of a representative of a Nation, less boastful perhaps of its regard for the rights of man, but more observant of them." As someone who hoped that the American republican experiment would serve as a model for the world, Madison surely felt the sting of this particular jibe. Even though many Washingtonians admitted that the District slave trade presented scenes of "wretchedness and human degradation disgraceful to our characters as citizens of a free government," the nation's congressional and executive leaders

continually refused to discuss the issue. Consequently, the practice continued and men like Coles found it increasingly difficult to ignore the issue.35

Perhaps most significantly for Coles, the constant threat of slave insurrection throughout the War of 1812 exposed in sharp relief the dangers an enslaved population posed to a nation in crisis. As during the American Revolution, residents of the Chesapeake region feared that slaves, a group many considered to be "an internal foe," would aid the British war effort.36 As early as the spring of 1812, Virginia Governor James Barbour informed the Council of State that the residents of Norfolk "associate with an invasion a probable insurrection of their slaves, who," he believed, "take a deep interest in a rupture between England and this Country." A year later, Elbridge Gerry, Jr., who was visiting his father in Washington City, observed that "the blacks in some places refuse to work and say they shall soon be free, and then the white people must look out." Margaret Bayard Smith, a resident of Washington and the wife of the editor of the National Intelligencer, remarked that "as for our enemy at home I have no doubt they will


if possible join the British,” but she reassured her sister “that the few scatter’d slaves about our neighbourhood, could not muster enough force to venture an attack.” Still, her husband “procured pistols” and every precaution was taken to ensure their protection in the event of an insurrection.

In the nation’s capital, residents attempted to prevent slave misbehavior and threats of violence by encouraging men exempted from militia duty to form voluntary associations to parol the city. Gerry observed that “should we be attacked” by the British, “there will be great danger of the blacks rising and to prevent this, patrols are very necessary, to keep them in awe.” Similarly, armed patrols constantly surveyed the coastal areas along the Chesapeake, shooting and arresting suspected escaped slaves wherever they appeared. In March 1813, for example, Nathaniel Burwell reported that ten slaves suspected of plotting an insurrection “have been apprehended and are in jail for examination.” Four months later, another patrol in Hampton, Virginia was greeted by the cheers of their neighbors when they shot at and retrieved twenty-two slaves who had commandeered a small boat in order to make their way to a British ship. In general, most Americans, but especially Southerners, responded to the persistent threat of slave

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insurrection during the war years by attempting to strengthen the slave system.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, however, Coles’s experiences with slavery and the ever-present threat of slave insurrection in the Chesapeake region during the War of 1812 led him to conclude that the only way to rid the nation of such a dangerous internal enemy was to abolish the institution of slavery. Convinced that he lacked the authority and ability to accomplish the task himself, Coles turned to Thomas Jefferson, a “revered Father . . . distinguished . . . by being foremost in establishing on the broadest bases the rights of man, & the liberty & independence” of the United States, to lead the cause of freedom once again. Amidst rumors of a British attack on Washington City during the summer of 1814, Coles penned a letter to his Albemarle County neighbor imploring him “to exert your knowledge & influence in devising & getting into operation some plan for the gradual emancipation of slavery.” From Coles’s perspective, only someone whose service to the nation had earned him the trust and confidence of the people could “put into complete practice those hallowed principles contained in that renown Declaration.” He encouraged Jefferson not to be dissuaded from acting on behalf of emancipation by “the fear of failing.” Even if he should not succeed, Coles declared, the knowledge that his opinions had been “on the side of emancipation when that question shall be agitated” more vigorously in the future should provide sufficient justification for coming forward on behalf of abolition.39

In his response to Coles’s plea, Jefferson confessed that although his generation

39Edward Coles to Thomas Jefferson, July 31, 1814, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.
had found it difficult to extend the principles of freedom and liberty to their bound laborers, “I had always hoped that the younger generation, receiving their early impressions after the flame of liberty had been kindled in every breast . . . would have sympathized with oppression where ever found, and prove their love of liberty beyond their own share of it” by demanding the abolition of slavery. To his dismay, except for Coles’s “solitary but welcome voice,” Jefferson had encountered few young men who were willing to act on behalf of emancipation, and had “considered the general silence which prevails on this subject as indicating an apathy unfavorable to every hope.” Still, Jefferson optimistically believed “the hour of emancipation is advancing in the march of time.” With the British depredation along the Chesapeake and the burning of Washington still fresh in his mind, however, Jefferson expressed the fear that the abolition of slavery would be the product, not of “the generous energies of our minds, . . . [but] excited and conducted by the power of our present enemy.” From his perspective, the timing of Coles’s request could not have been worse.40

Consequently, he declined Coles’s request and excused himself from any responsibility for emancipation by insisting on passing the torch of liberty to the next generation, “who can follow it up, and bear it through to its consumation” at some point in the future. Rather than pursue immediate emancipation, Jefferson recommended that Coles promote a gradual emancipation program similar to the plan he initially outlined in his Notes on the State of Virginia. “I have seen no proposition so expedient on the whole, 

40Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, August 25, 1814, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.
as that of emancipation of those born after a given day, and of their education and expatriation at a proper age. This,” he concluded, “would give time for a gradual extinction of that species of labor and substitution of another, and lessen the severity of the shock which an operation so fundamental cannot fail to produce.” To accomplish the eradication of slavery, then, Jefferson recommended that Coles remain in Virginia and promote gradual abolition until a “phalanx is formed” capable of “bring[ing] on and press[ing] the proposition perseveringly until its accomplishment.” He concluded by assuring Coles that any efforts on behalf of emancipation “shall have all my prayers, . . . the only weapons of an old man.”

Astonished by Jefferson’s refusal to advocate emancipation publicly, Coles reproached the Sage of Monticello for failing to recognize the potential power of his example. He disagreed with Jefferson’s conclusion that only the young could accomplish the task. “To effect so great and difficult an object, great & extensive powers both of mind & influence are required, which,” proclaimed Coles, “can never be possessed in so great a degree by the young.” As his experiences in Washington had demonstrated, young politicians “are too often led by ambitious views to . . . mark out a course for themselves, where they might be buffeted by the waves of opposition.” More importantly, he believed that only the leadership of “those who have acquired a great weight of character” could overcome the apathy and “weighty influence of habit & interest” that allowed slavery to persist unchallenged. Emancipation, he concluded, could only be achieved if “supported & encouraged by your sanction & patronage.” As for his own efforts on behalf of

“\textsuperscript{4}Ibid.
abolition, Coles confessed that “if I had supposed myself capable of being instrumental in bringing about a liberation” of Virginia’s enslaved laborers “it would afford me great happiness” if for no other reason than such effectiveness would allow him to remain in a society and enjoy a style of living he greatly preferred.42

Although wounded by Jefferson’s refusal to act, Coles decided to heed his neighbor’s advice. Rather than remain in Virginia as his neighbor had instructed, however, Coles concluded that the only way to work on behalf of abolition was to migrate west to a free territory, where his experiment in black freedom might inspire others to follow his example. This decision was not entirely altruistic, for Coles recognized the economic benefits that would accompany establishing himself on the frontier. As the fifth of five sons, he had inherited a small seven hundred and forty-two acre plantation situated along the Rockfish River in Amherst (now Nelson) County, Virginia. In 1808, when he assumed the management of the farm, Coles continued the practices established by his father, cultivating tobacco, wheat, and hemp with enslaved labor. He also continued his father’s habit of breeding horses. Despite these efforts, however, the economic hardships occasioned by the Jeffersonian embargos and the War of 1812 severely handicapped his efforts to make Rockfish a profitable operation. Even more detrimental to a profit, however, was the type of enslaved property Coles inherited. Although he acquired twenty bound laborers, only three individuals were capable of working in the fields. The remaining seventeen slaves were old and infirm, too young to harvest crops, physically

4Edward Coles to Thomas Jefferson, September 26, 1814, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.
disabled, or accustomed to domestic labor. Even supplementing his labor force by hiring bound laborers from family members and neighbors failed to improve his economic situation. Indeed, as early as 1812 he confessed to his brother that four years of intense effort had failed to relieve “a debt of $500” that perpetually overshadowed his plantation.43

Thus, less than a year after his exchange of letters with Jefferson, Coles ignored the objections of his family and friends and embarked on a second tour of the Old Northwest, where he intended to select a location that would both improve his economic circumstances and allow him to follow through with his convictions. With a portion of the cash from the sale of his farm to his brother Walter in hand, Coles departed Virginia in June 1815 and over the next six months investigated possible settlement sites in Ohio, Illinois, and Missouri. At the conclusion of his tour of the Mississippi and Missouri River Valleys, he confessed to his friend Nicholas Biddle that “I was disappointed in the impressions I formed” of the frontier. Yet, he acknowledged that he still thought “it a very desirable portion of our Country; so much so indeed,” he continued, “that it is probable I may yet make it the place of my residence.” In preparation for such an

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eventuality, Coles, along with two of his siblings, purchased a six thousand acre tract of fertile land in Lincoln County, Missouri, called Elprado. His third portion of the land was most attractive, he declared, because “it offers immense inducements to men of enterprise. . . I do not think I am extravagant in my calculations,” he continued, “when I say that 10,000$ in the hands of only a tolerably judicious man will in five years be worth 100,000$.”

Although he had eliminated any economic impediment to settling in the west when he purchased land, Coles continued to resist the decision to abandon his native state and the life style he enjoyed. “Were I a married man I think I could set myself down and be very happy in the Illinois Territory, especially,” he proclaimed, “if I could induce some clever sociable fellows to accompany and live near me.” In reality, however, Coles was single and claimed “a partiality for society” that ensured that he “could not be happy” on the frontier “however much wealth and distinction I might acquire.” Consequently, as had been the case when he returned home from college almost ten years earlier, Coles faced a difficult situation. His preference for high society frequently caused him to contemplate residing in a city like Philadelphia. Yet, his conscience pushed him to consider resettling in the West where he could liberate his chattel property. “But then,” he asked Biddle, “what should I do? A man must have some occupation, something to engage his
attention, or else he cannot be happy. On which of the remote horns of this dilemma I shall hang my destinies," he concluded, "is yet uncertain."

Once again, the arrival of a letter from James Madison provided Coles with an opportunity to postpone making a choice. Apparently, a breach of relations between the United States and Russia had occurred when the Russian Consul General, Nicholas Kosloff, was arrested in Philadelphia for raping a twelve-year-old servant girl. Madison had refused to intervene on behalf of the Russian official, citing a lack of authority over state officials. André de Dashkoff, the Russian Minister, expressed his outrage by informing the Emperor that Madison’s inactivity constituted a violation of diplomatic immunity. Emperor Alexander responded to the charge by banning the American chargé de affaires from St. Petersburg. Madison asked if Coles would be willing to present a collection of letters from the administration explaining the particulars of the situation to the Russian government. Unlike six years earlier, Coles did not hesitate to accept the President’s request, informing Madison that without anything “at this time to engage my attention at home, and being desirous of seeing Europe, I have no objection to availing myself of this occasion to do so.” In early August, Coles boarded the United States Brig of War, Prometheus, and once again headed east rather than west.

Coles arrived in St. Petersburg in early October 1816 only to discover that “the

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43Edward Coles to Nicholas Biddle, May 15, 1816, Edward Coles Papers, ISHL.

Emperor is now absent in Russian Poland” and was not expected to return for several weeks. Rather than pursue the Russian leader through the Polish countryside as the American consul recommended, Coles “judged it more consistent with the dignity of the government he represented that he should await the emperor’s return to St. Petersburg.” As he waited, Coles traveled through the countryside comparing Russian and American society. Most striking to him of all, were the significant differences between the labor systems of the two nations. As in the United States, “the VASSALS or slaves of Russia, are by law subject to the will and pleasure of their lords and masters.” The law defined them as property “to be bought and sold, . . . and [they could be] made to labor when, where and in the way” their masters demanded. Unlike in the American South, however, Russian vassals were “inseparably connected with the soil . . . and can only be disposed of along with it.” Additionally, “they are not so much an object of traffic . . . nor are the duties they are required to perform or the treatment they receive,” he explained, “any thing like so severe or oppressive” as the enslaved laborers of America. Coles also noted that Russian vassals could own property, and rather than owing all of their labor to their masters, Russian serfs were only expected to spend a portion of their time cultivating crops for their owner, devoting the rest of their time to laboring for themselves. From these observations, Coles concluded that Russian serfdom was far less dehumanizing for both the laborer and the master than American slavery.47

According to Coles, the conditions vassals endured in Russia were also significantly better than those experienced by American slaves because "the situation of the vassals is gradually improving." Unlike in America, where Coles found few Southern men of his generation willing to promote abolition, he encountered in Russia a "young nobility" who were "more enlightened, and entertain[ed] more liberal sentiments than their fathers," and who were interested in ameliorating the condition of their country's bound laborers. More significantly, the Emperor himself supported the eradication of vassalage. "[I]t is hoped," Coles proclaimed, that Emperor Alexander's "liberality and knowledge" would lead him to "follow up the goodly step he took last summer, when he issued his ukase [decree], for the gradual though speedy emancipation of all vassals of the province of Esthonia" with a more general proclamation. To his surprise and dismay, Coles had discovered that an autocratic society seemed more inclined to pursue emancipation than his own republican government, which was founded on a belief in the inherent freedom of every individual.48

After he successfully concluded his official business in St. Peters burg, Coles embarked on a ten-month tour of Europe and Great Britain. He visited Holland, France, England, and Ireland. As he moved from place to place he attended royal courts, dined with royalty, and formed acquaintances and friendships with General Lafayette, the Duke of Wellington, and future Illinois resident Morris Birkbeck. While his trip abroad expanded his exposure to and increased his desire to remain a part of elite society, Coles's

48 "Interesting Views of the Russian Empire," [by Edward Coles], Richmond Enquirer, December 13, and 16, 1817.

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experiences in Russia and Europe only confirmed his determination to emancipate his enslaved property. Throughout the tour, slavery remained foremost in his mind. During his two month stay in Russia, he observed that “vassalage & treatment of the serfs . . . [was] infinitely a milder & less oppressive character” than American slavery. As he witnessed various instances of “oppression both political & religious,” Coles’s own “conviction of the superiority of our political institutions” strengthened. He confessed that this “increased . . . admiration & pride” in his native country “did not reconcile me, or in the least abate my objections & feelings to[ward] the state of bondage” in the United States. Instead, “that blot of Slavery” on America’s “otherwise enchanting escutcheon, was the more apparent & the more disfiguring.” Consequently, he returned home in the fall of 1817 more committed than ever before to “cheerfully hasten” his departure for Illinois where he intended to liberate his chattel property and rid himself of the foul stain of oppression that slavery imposed.49

As Coles confessed in an autobiography written nearly twenty years later, “I found my situation as Secretary to the President in every respect what Mr. Monroe had represented it would be.” While in Washington City, he had enjoyed “the finest opportunity to participate, & under the best instructor, to improve my knowledge of the theory & practice of politics.” His duties as the President’s private secretary had provided him with the ability to exert influence and cultivate a sense of authority otherwise unavailable to him. Additionally, Coles discovered that the authority he had acquired was

part of a national, indeed international, political culture he had helped to create. Whether he was visiting a major city along the Atlantic seaboard or touring Europe, Coles’s ability to employ his habits of civility to gather and distribute valuable political information marked him as a member of an American ruling class whose authority defined the nation’s political and social identity as particularly republican.  

But, the lingering presence of slavery constantly haunted Coles and led him to contemplate abandoning his career in national politics. The contradiction between the ideals upon which the American Republic was founded and the persistence of the institution of slavery was revealed to Coles on a regular basis throughout his residence in Washington City as well as during his European tour. Perhaps most importantly, he was constantly disappointed by the unwillingness of the nation’s, as well as Virginia’s, political leaders to take any action against the institution. Rather than dissuading him from liberating his chattel property, however, the general apathy Coles encountered only strengthened his determination to emancipate his enslaved laborers. By 1817, then, Coles had become convinced that he “could encounter anything sooner than hold slaves” and concluded that, without the “talents & acquirements to become the champion of humanity” in Virginia, “all I can do is to preserve my principles, & save my feelings, by flying from the scene of . . . oppression.”

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50 Coles, “Autobiography,” April 1844, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.

51 Coles, “Autobiography,” April 1844, Edward Coles Collection, HSP; “Extract to R.S.M. [Robert Madison?], March 31, 1815 and Edward Coles to Nicholas Biddle, April 8, 1815, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.
Thirty-one year old Edward Coles returned from his European tour determined to follow through with his conviction to liberate his enslaved property. Although he owned a large tract of land in Missouri and felt fully prepared to abandon his native Virginia, Coles was, as he had been when he returned home from college, a man without a career. To resolve the situation, he penned a letter to Ninian Edwards, the Territorial Governor of Illinois, requesting an appointment. Within several months, Edwards informed Coles that the appointment he sought was conferred on another individual, whose residence in the region made him a more attractive candidate for the position. Undeterred by the rejection, Coles journeyed to Illinois during the summer and fall of 1818 to investigate his career prospects in person. During his exploration of the region, he discovered that the position of Register of the Land Office at Edwardsville had become vacant. Rather than delay until he returned home, Coles immediately composed a letter to President James Monroe requesting consideration as a replacement. “You must be aware,” wrote Coles, “that the life I have led for many years past, whilst it disqualifies me in many respects for the enjoyment of the dull pursuits of a Farmer, qualifies me in some degree, and has given me a taste, for the sedentary occupation of the desk and of the bustling routine duties of an office.” Given his experience in Washington City, Coles expressed the hope that Monroe would agree he was well-suited for the post of Register of the Land Office at Edwardsville.52

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52Ninian Edwards to Edward Coles, January 18, 1818, Edward Coles Papers, CHS; Edward Coles to James Monroe, October 11, 1818, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.
To assure the President that he possessed the knowledge necessary to fulfill the
duties of the office he requested, Coles also revealed that “I have been almost incessantly
moving to and fro examining the different parts of the Illinois Territory” and proclaimed
that he preferred the region “that [is] watered by the Sangamon river.” Yet, because the
land in the Sangamon region remained unorganized, he had “been induced to purchase
4000 acres in small tracts” in the Military Bounty Tract. Until the land along the
Sangamon River became available and as long as the Military Bounty Tract remained
unimproved, Coles also declared that he planned “to settle . . . in the neighbourhood of
Edwardsville.” By investing in land and declaring his intention to reside in the region,
Coles transformed himself from a visitor to a resident, a condition he intended to increase
his attractiveness as a candidate for the land office post.53

In January 1819, just three months after Coles returned from his western tour,
Monroe disclosed that Governor Edwards had recently visited and assured him that no
other applicant had been given the office Coles desired. Consequently, the President
promised to nominate him and instructed Coles to “confer with the Senators” to ensure his
success. Throughout the winter of 1819, Coles lobbied vigorously for the appointment.
The personal and political connections established during his earlier residence in the
nation’s capital proved invaluable. By early March 1819, the Senate confirmed his
nomination without hesitation and Coles’s anxiety over his future career plans was, at

53Edward Coles to James Madison, October 11, 1818, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.
least, temporarily relieved.⁵⁴

Secure in the knowledge that a potentially lucrative political appointment awaited him in Illinois and under the impression that Illinois was a free state, Coles prepared to resettle himself and the bound labors he planned to liberate in western Illinois. Over the previous ten years he had struggled to come to terms with a personal conflict between his desire to achieve distinction by serving his nation and his determination to honor his convictions by emancipating the chattel property he inherited from his father. When, in 1810, he was confronted with a choice between a career in Washington City and a new life in the Old Northwest, Coles chose the former, believing that accepting the offer to serve as President James Madison's private secretary would provide him with the opportunity to fulfill his generational obligation to facilitate the emergence of a stable republican social order. Witnessing the divisive character of the Washington political community and the potentially destructive impact of the persistence of slavery, however, Coles concluded that he could not succeed if he remained east of the Appalachian Mountains. His experiences in the nation's capital, then, had revealed just how elusive a harmonious republican social order could be, and, consequently, Coles turned westward seeking a new environment where he could contribute to the development of the ideal republican society he had felt duty-bound to promote ever since his days as a young man in Williamsburg.

CHAPTER 3

"From slavery and poverty, to freedom and independence": Migration and Settlement on the Illinois Frontier

In early April 1819 Edward Coles and his bound laborers journeyed from Pittsburgh to Harrod's Creek, a settlement just ten miles above Louisville, Kentucky, by floating down the beautiful Ohio River. Encountering a “good tide of water, and remarkably fine weather,” they completed the first leg of their trip to Edwardsville, Illinois in just over nine days. As Coles explained to his mother, the “voyage has been very agreeable, . . . but for the sickness of Tom & Emanuel,” two of the enslaved laborers he depended upon to direct the crowded flatboats down the river. Left with only Ralph and Robert to man the oars, he confessed that “I had to work hard the whole first week.” Despite the inconvenience of laboring at the oars, however, Coles revealed that he still accomplished the purpose of his journey, the emancipation of his chattel property. “Soon after getting on board the boat,” he declared, “I called them all together, and told them . . . that they were . . . free.” To Coles’s surprise, Ralph, the leader of the group, “appeared to feel less than any of the others the value” of the right he had restored to them. Once Coles announced his intention to provide each individual over the age of twenty-three with “160 acres of land,” however, Ralph “was more pleased.” Relieved that he had finally realized his long-held determination to manumit his enslaved inheritance, Coles pledged to monitor
“the recoiling effects of so . . . sudden a transition – from slavery and poverty, to freedom and independence.”

Like Coles, many of those who immigrated across the Appalachian Mountains in the early nineteenth century assumed that the West would provide an environment where they could preserve their freedom and independence. William Newnhan Bane, for example, conducted a tour of western America in 1822 and concluded that “in the United States man, instead of renting a farm, can, for a small sum of money become a respectable landholder . . . The emigrant,” he proclaimed, “becomes here independent.” Likewise, Elias Pym Fordham, who settled in Illinois in 1817, rhapsodized that “the wilds of Illinois, . . . are the fields of enterprise, the cradle of freedom, [and] . . . the place of refuge to the oppressed.” Significantly, many Americans envisioned a West that preserved the freedom of its inhabitants by excluding slavery. As early as 1784, Philip Freneau, one of America’s most noteworthy early poets, wrote: “While virtue warms the generous breast, There heaven-born freedom shall reside, . . . When man shall no longer crush, When Reason shall enforce her sway, Nor these fair regions raise our blush, Where still the African complains, And mourns his yet unbroken chains.” America’s republican experiment, according to these observers, would be secured by a western region populated by a people who were politically free and economically independent.  

1Edward Coles to Mother [Rebecca Tucker Coles], April 24, 1819, Edward Coles Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP). For a more romantic rendering of the emancipation scene, see Edward Coles, “Autobiography,” April 1844, and Edward Coles, “The Emancipation of His Slaves, as Told by Him,” October, 1827, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.

2William Newnham Blane, An Excursion through the United States and Canada during the Years 1822-23 (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1824), 167; Elias Pym Fordham, Personal Narrative of Travels in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky and of a Residence in the Illinois
Several post-revolutionary political leaders took this vision of the West a step further. All three of Coles's mentors, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe, for example, believed that the settlement and development of the West was essential to the survival of the Union. From their perspective, the only way to prevent the disintegration of the nation from within and the destruction of the Union from foreign threats was to forge strong economic and social bonds between the Atlantic seaboard and the interior of the continent. To accomplish their goal, these revolutionary leaders fashioned a western policy in the 1780s designed to ensure that the right kind of settlers tamed the wilderness, industrious pioneers whose desire for independence and freedom would inspire them to move beyond a mere subsistence and produce agricultural commodities for the market. Additionally, the economic links created by the development of an internal market, they firmly believed, would simultaneously preserve both the West and the nation. For Jefferson in particular, the absence of slavery in the region north of the Ohio River was an essential component of the nation's emerging western policy; for only them would immigrants who possessed the proper character move into the region.  

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Edward Coles, then, immigrated to Illinois expecting to find the harmonious republican society he had failed to find in Washington City and which Thomas Jefferson had prophesied for the Old Northwest. The combination of enterprising, but virtuous small farmers, free labor, and the abundant availability of inexpensive land was supposed to foster the emergence of an agrarian Republic that could withstand any threat and persist indefinitely. As Register of the Land Office at Edwardsville, Coles intended to oversee the fair and easy distribution of land to worthy settlers, to help construct the economic foundation and communal character that would serve as the backbone of the nation’s republican experiment. As a liberator, he planned to demonstrate that emancipation was possible, and indeed practical. Additionally, as an advocate of equality, Coles expected to prevent the region from being tainted with the stain of slavery, yet hospitable to a free black presence. By settling on the frontier, he attempted to realize the republican vision initially espoused by his Albemarle County neighbor, a Republic of farmers who relied on their own labor and the efforts of their family members to sustain themselves and simultaneously ensure the survival of the nation.

As early as 1815, however, Coles confessed to his family and friends that he “anticipate[d] the many difficulties I shall have to encounter, not less from removing to a new country & into a society so differently organized from that in which I have been brought up,” but also as a result of “the taste & habits I have acquired by the kind of life I have led for the last five or 6 years.” He recognized that the Old Northwest was relatively

sparsely settled, economically immature, and, most importantly, lacked the cosmopolitan society he preferred. Still, he assumed that the very social skills and habits of civility he had refined in Washington City would translate into public authority once he settled in Illinois. More than anything else, his position as Register of the Land Office confirmed this assumption. Like his previous experience as private secretary, Coles's federal appointment to oversee the sale of public land elicited the respect of both the region’s ruling elite and ordinary farmers and ensured he would become as widely acquainted with the inhabitants as he was with the land of Illinois.⁴

In many ways, however, Coles encountered a frontier community that was very different from his expectations. Like the society he experienced in Washington City, the political community Coles observed in Illinois was fractured and divisive, populated by aspiring elites who formed personal bonds with the region’s leading men with the hope of advancing their own interests. Perhaps most distressing, the Illinois he immigrated to in 1819 was far more similar to Virginia than any free state north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Like the Old Dominion, Illinois contained a slaveholding elite who controlled most of the political offices, a potentially expanding enslaved population, and a white majority with strong anti-black prejudices. Additionally, the increasing prominence of the slavery issue combined with growing dissatisfaction over the declining economic conditions occasioned by the Panic of 1819 to exacerbate tension among the residents of the region. So, rather than a harmonious republican society populated by free and independent citizens, Coles

⁴Edward Coles to Nicholas Biddle, April 8, 1815 and Edward Coles to R. S. M., March 31, 1815, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, Firestone Library, Princeton University (hereafter PU).
joined a fractured community rife with competing interests, a society struggling to define its character in much the same way the nation was doing as a whole.

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In at least one way, Coles’s prediction that Illinois society would be differently organized from what he was accustomed appeared accurate. The frontier society he joined, and the community in Edwardsville in particular, was just as Coles had expected, much more rural and rustic than the cosmopolitan cities he had experienced. Edwardsville, the seat of government in Madison County, boasted a population of one hundred and sixty-six and the surrounding countryside was similarly sparsely settled, containing only 5,489 residents [See FIGURE 1]. Still, Madison County was the most populated district in the state and Edwardsville among the region’s most developed towns. By 1819, as Reverend Thomas Lippincott observed, Edwardsville was “the most noted town . . . in Illinois.” Located just twenty-five miles east of St. Louis, Edwardsville emerged as a major trading center on the eastern side of the Mississippi River after the War of 1812. Along with a court house, land office, and Indian Agency, the town counted several taverns, at least two stores, a hotel, several boarding houses, a printing office and newspaper, a public bank, and a flour mill among its enterprises. Despite these potentially lucrative businesses, the Edwardsville Coles encountered in the spring of 1819 lacked the refined society and cosmopolitan social offerings he had become accustomed to in Washington City, Philadelphia, and abroad.  

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FIGURE 1

Illinois Settlement Pattern, 1820

The town's prominent citizens, however, did have higher aspirations and constantly worked to improve their community. In the summer of 1819, just after Coles arrived, a group of residents organized a subscription library. In August of that year the "Director" announced in the local newspaper that a collection of books purchased from Boston had arrived and reminded those who had failed to pay their subscription that their fee was due. That same year, the residents of the town formed a singing society, which benefitted from the arrival of books for the library, for the newly-acquired collection also contained about three dozen of the "most choice selection of Music Books." While no common schools existed in Edwardsville when Coles arrived, Joshua Atwater taught young people between 1818 and 1820. Madame Jerome, an old French resident, followed Atwater's efforts when she opened an academy for women, where she instructed students in French, geography, history, drawing, arithmetic and needlework.  

Edward Coles supplemented these efforts within a few months of his arrival when he organized the state's first agricultural society. In an editorial penned by him under the pseudonym "A Farmer of Madison County" and published in the October 9, 1819 issue of the Edwardsville Spectator, Coles declared that "the objects of the society would be numerous. It would collect all the information the individual members possessed," he

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proclaimed, “as well as that derived from a correspondence with other agricultural societies” and publish the material for “general information.” More importantly, the members of the society would promote the introduction of “the most valuable farming and garden seeds, and fruit trees; encourage and facilitate the introduction of the best breeds of domestic animals, and supply premiums” for particularly praiseworthy agricultural products. Morris Birkbeck, a friend of Coles’s from his tour in England and who had settled in the eastern portion of the state in 1817, was elected President and Coles was selected to serve as the organization’s vice-resident. Other prominent Madison County residents, among them Thomas Lippincott, George Churchill, and Emanuel West, joined the society and together these men sought to improve the agricultural economy of the region.7

Within two years of his arrival in Edwardsville, Coles also witnessed the creation of several other organizations, whose membership included many of the men he had recruited to join the Illinois Agricultural Society. In the fall of 1821, a group of residents announced the establishment of the “Illinois Association for the promotion of Economy.” The association’s first publication encouraged “Persons who wish to live in a community free of debt, and really independent, . . . to attend, and become members.” The members of the group met regularly and discussed regional economic concerns, focusing on transportation, trade, agricultural production, and land issues. That same fall the

Edwardsville Forum began meeting once a week to discuss various philosophical issues. Modeled after similar organizations created on college campuses and operating in urban centers throughout the nation, the Edwardsville Forum published discussion questions in the local newspaper, solicited essays, and encouraged members to discuss their opinions unreservedly.

On Thursday, November 29, 1821, Thomas Lippincott opened the Forum's initial proceedings with a declaration of the society's purpose. "In the pursuit of knowledge, there is something so refined, so ennobling, that, to a mind capable of exertion, ordinary pleasures compared with it, sink into insignificance... Determined to be no longer confined to the dull routine of fatiguing business and sensual pleasures," he proclaimed, "the members of this society have resolved to devote a portion of their time, to that object, marked out by the rational faculties with which they are endowed by their Creator, as the noblest – 'The feast of reason, and the flow of soul.'" Through these organizations, Coles and his fellow-elites attempted to create a more refined social culture that would mirror the cosmopolitan character of the larger eastern cities and simultaneously elevate and improve their own community. At first glance, then, Coles established acquaintances with men who seemed to share his vision of the frontier as a place where economic prosperity would ensure individual freedom and independence.

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*"Illinois Economical Association," Edwardsville Spectator, November 6, 13, 20, 1821 and "Edwardsville Forum," Edwardsville Spectator, November 27, December 4, 11, 1821 and February 2, 1822. These organizations contained a common membership that included such men as William H. Hopkins, Abraham Prickett, Reuben Hopkins, A. M. Hamtramck, Thomas Lippincott, George Churchill, Edward Coles, and William C. Wiggins. These men, who were frequently members of the Illinois Agricultural Society, also established the "Farmers of Madison County Society," in February 1822. See "Farmers of Madison County Society," Edwardsville Spectator, February 19, 1822."
Edwardsville also served as a residence for many of the state’s more outspoken citizens, as well as some of Illinois’s most influential and well-known politicians. Hooper Warren, a native of New Hampshire, established the *Edwardsville Spectator* in May 1819. Although he published articles on a variety of issues ranging from local politics to national land policy, Warren focused most of his attention on the issue of slavery. As he stated in his editorial preamble, he was “By birth and education a republican,” and would devote his editorial energies to promoting “the cause of republicanism and liberty.” George Churchill, who settled in the region before Illinois became a state, regularly contributed editorials to state newspapers offering his opinions on local policies. Likewise, men such as Thomas Lippincott, Abraham Prickett, Judge Joseph Gillespie, Captain Curtiss Blakeman, and many of those who joined the various organizations in town, frequently voiced their opinions publicly and quickly emerged as respected authorities on statewide political and economic issues.9

Lippincott, a great promoter of the town, also noted that Edwardsville’s reputation as a flourishing town derived from the fact that “the chief men of the State reside there.” Among the state’s political elite, both Ninian Edwards, for whom the town was named, and Jesse B. Thomas called Edwardsville home. Edwards, who had been territorial governor and controlled the lions-share of the region’s political appointments before statehood, was one of the state’s wealthiest residents. He was also recognized as the leader of the Edwards party, a group of local elites whose personal and economic interests

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tied them to the territorial leader. Edwards counted his cousin Nathaniel Pope, son-in-law, Daniel Pope Cook, and close friends Leonard White, Theophilis W. Smith, and Thomas C. Brown among his supporters. Thomas, who had played an instrumental role in orchestrating Illinois's division from Indiana in 1809 but who was bitterly disappointed when his initiative went unrewarded, led the anti-Edwards, or Thomas/Kane, party, which consisted of Elias Kent Kane, John M'Lean, Joseph B. Phillips, and Shadrach Bond. Throughout the territorial period, each contingent jockeyed for political dominance by attempting to acquire control of as many local offices as possible.¹⁰

Once Illinois entered the Union in 1818, competition between these factions diminished significantly for a variety of reasons. Both groups had cooperated to achieve the common goal of statehood, and as a result, many of the political positions subject to legislative appointment were divided evenly among them. Edwards and Thomas each received one of the senate seats in Congress, Daniel Pope Cook, Edwards's protege, was selected as Attorney General while Elias Kent Kane became Secretary of State, and Thomas C. Brown and Joseph B. Phillips, Edwards and Thomas men respectively, each received a seat on the state supreme court. Additionally, after 1818 many more state and local officials were subject to popular election, and the right to vote was extended to all white residents over twenty-one, making it difficult for the small intimate factions to influence such a large constituency across a broad geographic area. Perhaps most importantly, the selection of Edwards and Thomas for national office in Washington City

tempered the rivalry between their political followers who lacked the visible leadership that had bound them together. Yet, old habits persisted and both men and those who maintained strong political ties to them continued to figure prominently in the political contests during the first years of statehood.11

As Register of the Land Office in Edwardsville, an appointment conferred on him by his Virginia neighbor and close friend President James Monroe, Edward Coles was immediately recognized as a member of the region’s ruling elite. Like Edwards, Thomas, Cook, and the others, he boasted a formal education, possessed considerable wealth, and benefitted from prominent political connections. Few residents failed to learn about his genteel background, of his personal friendships with James Madison, President James Monroe, and Thomas Jefferson, or of his experiences abroad. Hooper Warren was Coles’s roommate in a local boarding house during the Virginian’s first months in Edwardsville. As he later recalled, Warren “learned his inmost heart, morally, politically and socially.” He confessed that he found Coles to be “exceedingly loquacious,” forcing Warren to endure long conversations that generally focused on “his management of the etiquette of the President’s House . . . and of the adventures of his European tour.” The latter, Warren revealed, generally “consisted of accounts of his dining and sporting with the Lords and Nobles, and of the great respect and attention paid to him, particularly while at London, Paris and St. Petersburg.” Concluding that Coles’s penchant for storytelling

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was really an arrogant demand for respect, Warren hardly meant his description of his roommate to be flattering. Still, Coles clearly sought to lay a foundation for his claim to authority in a new community. Just as his social skills had ensured his public authority east of the Appalachian Mountains, Coles expected his education, genteel heritage, personal connections to prominent national politicians, and previous political experience to guarantee him membership among the frontier elite and inspire respect and deference from his less-well-to-do neighbors.¹²

Coles's duties as Register strengthened his expectation and exercise of authority among his new neighbors. He was primarily responsible for orchestrating the sale of public land, entering applications and maintaining the plat maps for the Edwardsville land district. At the conclusion of each public sale, he organized the office's records, finalized the notations on the district plat maps and forwarded copies of the information to the General Land Office in Washington City, where the purchases were recorded officially. He was also required to communicate regularly with the Commissioner of the General Land Office regarding the progress of sales, conditions of public lands, and any problems encountered within the district. For his labor, he received an annual salary of five hundred dollars and a one percent commission on all the land he sold, minus the expenses of maintaining his office.¹³

Coles arrived in Edwardsville just a few weeks before the next public sale of


government land, which was scheduled to occur from May 3 to June 30, 1819, and he had a great deal of work to perform in preparation for the event. After consulting with his predecessor, Benjamin Stephenson, he rented office space from James Mason, a local boardinghouse owner, hired William P. McKee to serve as his clerk, composed several advertisements and arranged for their publication, and traveled through the immediate vicinity announcing the coming event. Additionally, many residents customarily arrived in town several days before the public auction began. Consequently, Coles, who was familiar with much of the land in the region as a result of his earlier tours of the area, met with aspiring landowners in his office, at local taverns, and during private dinner parties. Anyone who sought to secure pre-selected tracts of land or merely wanted information on which portions of the area for sale contained the best land felt compelled to pay homage to the Register.\textsuperscript{14}

The basic structure of the public sale itself similarly reinforced Coles's position of authority within the community. On the day the public sale began, Coles and his clerk, McKee, emerged from the land office accompanied by a crier who announced their intentions to the gathering audience. As they moved through a crowd that had steadily accumulated over the previous week, the three men made their way to a platform and took their places before the prospective purchasers. The crier then declared the auction open, and offered the first tract of land for sale. After a short pause, during which time members

of the audience shouted their bids, the sale proceeded in traditional auction fashion, moving swiftly from one tract offering to the next, with periodic gaps as the price reached levels beyond most of the attendants’s ability to pay. This procedure continued each day for nearly three weeks. In this way, Coles and his employees repeatedly performed their authority before the public, a process that must have seemed relatively familiar to Coles after his experiences in Washington City and abroad.15

During the course of the sale, Coles also formed personal connections with many of the individuals who attended the public auction. After each successful bid, the new landowner made his way to the desk of the Register where he officially recorded the tract’s coordinates, his name, as well as the amount of his payment. While some successful purchasers returned to their homes, often already situated on the land they just purchased, many new settlers remained in town to celebrate their acquisitions. Undoubtedly, Coles occasionally congratulated these men on their purchases as he dined or socialized in a local tavern at the end of a long day of public sales. Even if he failed to recall their names, those who bought the land in Edwardsville surely remembered him. For most of the individuals who attended the public auction and walked away with land, the experience held a degree of importance that rivaled marriage, the birth of their children, and death; in a matter of moments the choices they made imposed life-long consequences. Whether they retained ownership of the particular tract for the remainder of their lives, sold it a few years later in hopes of acquiring a better tract further west, or were forced, due to economic distress, to relinquish their claim, few purchasers would

15Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business*, 75.
forget the experience or the men involved in the transaction. Like his position as private secretary to the President, Coles’s official post on the frontier allowed him to command the respect of nearly everyone he encountered. In the process, he gained a wide acquaintanceship not only with the most prominent men of the town and region, but also with the humblest settlers who sought the economic independence that accompanied land ownership.¹⁶

Although Coles insinuated himself into the elite circles of Illinois’s society and commanded the respect of his more undistinguished neighbors relatively easily, nearly every characteristic he experienced of the Prairie State’s social order during his first two years as a resident defied his expectations. Rather than facilitating his own transition from debt to abundant wealth, Illinois only offered a new location in which the same economic problems that had plagued him in Virginia persisted. Rather than providing a safe haven for his newly-freed bound laborers, Illinois exhibited an environment hostile to free black settlement. And, most shockingly, rather than a state free of the stain of slavery, Illinois allowed the institution to persist under the veil of indentured servitude. As Coles learned relatively quickly, little about his new home turned out the way he had anticipated.

Like many of his fellow-immigrants, Coles moved to the frontier to improve his economic situation. As he had confessed to his mother during his journey to Illinois in April 1819, “I feel so many partialities, & so strongly the force of the attractions on your side of the mountains,” declared Coles, “that I cannot bring myself to believe that I shall ever be a permanent inhabitant of this” place. Instead, he viewed his temporary removal

¹⁶Rohrbough, The Land Office Business, 75-77. See also, Norton, Centennial History, 46.
to Illinois as an opportunity to “make fortune enough to enable me to live . . . in Phila[delphia] or wherever else I may prefer.” Coles recognized, however, that the meager salary that accompanied his land office position would hardly result in a savings sufficient to sustain a residence elsewhere. Consequently, he intended to supplement his income by investing in land. He already owned five thousand eight hundred and ninety acres in Missouri as well as just over six acres of town lots in St. Louis, property he had purchased prior to his removal from Virginia. Similarly, during his 1818 visit to Illinois, he acquired three thousand six hundred and eighty acres of land in the Illinois Military Bounty Tract. Composed of individual grants bestowed on veterans from the War of 1812, the Bounty Tract land he acquired was located in an undeveloped region north of Madison County. Although the property was valuable, containing rich prairies, abundant timber, and adequate access to water, Coles’s position in the land office required establishing a farm closer to Edwardsville. Therefore, he reserved the property accumulated during his earlier visits to sell for profit at a later date and bought land in Madison County [See FIGURE 2].

When he was not performing his day-to-day responsibilities at the land office, Coles spent most of his time attending to his farm, Prairieland, located three miles outside of Edwardsville. Purchased in May and June 1819 from local landowners, Coles

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Edward Coles Property in Madison County, IL
(adapted from Henry S. Tanner, Illinois and Missouri. Philadelphia: Henry Tanner, 1823.)
obtained a three hundred and ninety-four acre tract for under two thousand dollars that already had “a deserted log cabin” and several enclosed fields. Within a few weeks of acquiring the land, he purchased “6 weeding hoes . . . Geer [sic] for 2 horses” and forty-nine dollars worth of tools for clearing and planting the prairie. Employing “no white person, but leav[ing] the whole to my Negroes,” Coles “commenced ploughing up the Prairie, and splitting rails to fence it; and continued breaking prairie, and planting corn until the first week in July.” Using the four horses they brought with them, Ralph, Robert, and Thomas “planted between 12 and 15 acres in corn for each horse.” The black laborers then turned their attention to “mowing hay from the prairie, and fallowing it to seed wheat” in the fall. By the end of the summer, Coles had converted forty-eight to sixty acres of his farm to the cultivation of corn and may have produced as many as two thousand bushels of corn for the market.18

Like Coles, many new immigrants were simultaneously lured to Illinois by the region’s abundant fertile land and propelled there by the desire for economic independence. Victor Collot, who visited the region in 1796, declared that “the province of the Illinois is perhaps the only spot respecting which travelers have given no exaggerated accounts. . . . It is superior to any description,” he continued, “for local beauty, fertility, climate, and the means of every kind which nature has lavished upon it.” Similarly, according to one early immigrant, Gershom Flagg, Illinois “is the Richest and

most handsomely situated of any I have ever seen.” Not only was the land fertile, but the growing tide of immigration after 1815 seemed to guarantee that property values would increase. Two years after he settled outside of Edwardsville, Flagg remarked that “land which was bought two or three years ago for two dollars an acre is now selling at 10 to 12.” Morris Birkbeck likewise assured his friends in Great Britain that “the working farmer, by the amount of capital required in England, as a renter, may own and cultivate a much better farm” in Illinois. He attempted to encourage others to make their way to the Prairie State by advertising that “our soil appears to be rich, . . . so easy of tillage [and] profits on capital employed in this way in this country are marvelous.”

Coles and these promoters, however, benefitted from several advantages few new landowners enjoyed. Unlike most new immigrants, Coles purchased his land outright, paying for the entire tract in one payment. To follow Coles’s example, a newcomer would have had to possess at least three hundred and twenty dollars cash, the amount required to purchase the government imposed minimum quarter section at two dollars an acre. Instead, the average settler took advantage of the government’s generous credit program and generally reserved his one hundred and sixty acre claim by furnishing the Receiver of Public Monies with one-twentieth of the total purchase price, or sixteen dollars, on the day of the auction. Within forty days, the purchaser was required to pay the remaining portion

of the first installment, sixty-four dollars. The rest of the purchase price was due in three more yearly payments of eighty dollars each. If a farmer submitted his payments early he received a discount, reducing the total price of his claim to two hundred and thirty-two dollars. If a settler failed to make any of his payments and no one else claimed the land, he also enjoyed an additional ninety-day reprieve within which to raise the funds necessary to make the delinquent payment. While the government offered fairly liberal credit to prospective landowners between 1814 and 1820 and created conditions designed to ensure equal access to public land, most new residents encountered considerable difficulty accumulating the cash necessary to meet their payments and constantly feared that they might lose ownership of their property. As the editor of the *Illinois Emigrant* noted in March 1819, only "one fourth part" of Illinois's landowners "have paid for their possessions, and are able to purchase stock, tho' not to a great amount!"

Similarly, Coles bought an improved farm while most new inhabitants purchased unimproved land. Consequently, they spent most of their initial months on the frontier establishing themselves. First, they had to construct their lodgings. If they lacked the cash to have a cabin built, which was most often the case, farmers had to cut the timber and assemble the structure themselves, a daunting task for families that often contained

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only one or two men. Second, they had to till a sufficient portion of their land to feed their family, a feat that required either breaking the prairie or girding enough trees to create fields for their crops. They then had to fence the turned soil to protect it from wild animals. While a particularly industrious farmer with a large family might succeed in planting and fencing fields of corn or wheat on as many as thirty acres, most settlers managed to cultivate only "a small patch of corn for bread." As Fordham observed, most new inhabitants "raise[d] a little indian corn, pumpkins, hogs, and sometimes have a Cow or two... But their rifle is their principle means of support." Indeed, as one new arrival commented, settlers struggled so much during the initial year of residence, that they "felt very rich" and often concluded that they were "getting on right smart" if they managed to construct a cabin, till a few acres, accumulate "an abundance of nuts - and [own] hogs... fat enough to kill."21

Many new immigrants attempted to minimize the initial demands imposed by settling on unimproved land by relying on the generosity of neighbors who arrived before them. "When a new-comer a house, cut and split his rails, ... [and] fence[d] ... the land he wished to cultivate." Additionally, they often offered "every thing they possessed, in the way of tools, teams, wagons, provisions, and their own personal services" to aid their newest neighbor in establishing his farm. Neighborhood networks of mutuality, rather than the accumulation of cash, then, functioned as the predominate strategy of survival on

the frontier. Even with the aid of neighbors, however, most new arrivals managed to accomplish little more than what Birkbeck described as “the necessaries of life,” a roof over their head and enough food to last through the first winter.  

Perhaps most importantly, Coles’s success during his first summer in Illinois resulted largely from the labor of the men and women he emancipated. As he informed James Madison, Coles hired “about one half of them” while the others found employment in the neighborhood. Kate Crawford maintained the house, cooked for those who worked on the farm, and cared for her children. Ralph and Robert Crawford and Thomas Cobb worked in the fields and, in the fall, managed the hogs Coles purchased for the farm. In exchange for working on his farm during the first year, Coles paid Kate, Thomas, Robert, and Ralph “wages in money” and covered their daily expenses. Throughout the year Coles bought corn meal, potatoes, beef, wine, and “bacon for my people.” He also purchased “a dress for Kate,” “cloth for Bob & Tom,” “Linnen [sic] for my Negroes Shirts,” and paid them “for making their shoes.” On several occasions he likewise paid their medical expenses. When Ralph became ill with “bilious fever” in the fall of 1819, Coles supplied the services of a doctor, the regular doses of wine the physician prescribed and, when he died in early October, he paid “for Ralph’s coffin.”

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23Coles, “Account Book, 1818-1839, Volume IV,” Edward Coles Collection, HSP. For wages during this period, see Buck, Illinois in 1818, 137-38. During their second year of employment, Coles paid them in “stock, tools, food” and allowed them to keep “half of all they made” on the farm, which they could then sell on the market for a profit. He also continued to purchase “Beef for my Negroes,” clothing for Robert, Thomas, Kate, and the children, and once again covered their accounts with the local
Most new settlers, who rarely had the funds to buy their land, certainly lacked the extra cash required to hire laborers to work on their farms. In 1819, the average wage for hired white farm laborers hovered around thirteen dollars a month for seasonal work and ranged between three and five dollars an acre for clearing land. Domestic help usually demanded five dollars a month as well as room and board. Additionally, Illinois suffered from a severe labor shortage. The availability of inexpensive government land as well as the ease with which settlers could squat on unsurveyed or unoccupied tracts discouraged most new arrivals from working for someone else. Even those who managed to find an individual willing to work or save enough money to hire them constantly complained about the unreliability of the help. Christiana Holmes Tillson, for example, hired five different women to help her maintain her house over a two-year period. Unable to retain laborers, who frequently left merely because they “longed for a change,” Tillson was frequently exhausted as she struggled to keep up with the daily demands of her household.24

While the majority of Illinois’s newest residents struggled to maintain ownership of their land and carve out a subsistence, Coles’s wealth and access to labor, then, ensured a degree of stability and potential for improvement few newcomers enjoyed. During his first summer in Illinois, Coles’s Prairieland farm expenses, including the price of his property and the livestock he purchased during his westward journey, amounted to just over

physician. Nancy Gains and Polly Crawford found employment as domestic servants in Edwardsville and the immediate countryside. Sucky and Manuel, along with their children, moved to St. Louis where they sought employment as hired hands and domestic servants.

twenty-three hundred dollars. By the end of the same period, the acreage converted to
crops produced nearly two thousand bushels of corn. Selling at thirty cents a bushel, he
earned roughly six hundred dollars after he sold the crops on the market. Together with
his income from the land office, which totaled one hundred and seventy-five dollars,
Coles's first few months in Illinois covered about one third of his start-up costs.

As he complained to James Madison earlier in June 1819, Coles's situation as
Register had not “more than paid for feeding my horse,” and he confessed that unless the
August sale of public lands increased dramatically, “I shall certainly resign . . . this fall.”
Fortunately for Coles, the public auction he conducted during the last two weeks of
August proved lucrative, garnering him seven hundred and twenty dollars. When
combined with the proceeds from the sale of his wheat, Coles managed to break even after
just ten months on the frontier, a feat the average settler accomplished after at least two
years of intense labor.²⁵

The Panic of 1819, however, conspired to thwart Coles's efforts to maintain his
position of influence and finance a future outside of Illinois and threatened to destroy the
emergence of an agrarian republic. In the summer of 1818, officers of the Bank of the
United States curtailed the expansion of banking and credit by demanding that all balances
due from local branches be paid in full. Almost immediately, the value of paper currency
everywhere dramatically depreciated. In Illinois, for example, “bank-bills soon fell to
thirty-three and one-third cents on the dollar.” Additionally, the region lacked a sufficient

²⁵Edward Coles to James Madison, July 20, 1819, Edward Coles Papers, CHS; Coles, “Account
Book, 1818-1839, Volume IV,” Edward Coles Collection, HSP.
supply of Eastern currency, the only money that retained its value. Coles revealed that throughout his land district “all the notes of the Banks of the District of Columbia, and to the North and East of it . . . are immediately bought up by the merchants and sent to the Eastward to purchase goods; so that they are seldom in circulation” locally.²⁶

Significantly for most settlers, the depreciation in state currency severely reduced the ability of those who already owned land to retain or sell their claims. The little cash they accumulated from the sale of surplus crops on the market was no longer worth full value, forcing them to generate one third to half again as much money to meet their land payments. Worse still, those who looked to sell their land before the next installment was due as a means of retaining the value of their improvements discovered that, like them, few individuals possessed the money necessary to buy land. As Gershom Flagg observed, “there are many here who paid out all the money they had in first installments on land and depended on selling it before the other payments become due. And as the price of land is now reduced no body will buy it at the former price. It will of course revert to the United States,” he continued, “unless some form of relief was offered.” Without a stable currency, few residents, well-to-do or poor, could hope to purchase or keep land.²⁷

A dramatic decrease in the price of agricultural commodities accompanied the

²⁶William H. Brown, An Historical Sketch of the Early Movement in Illinois for the Legalization of Slavery (Chicago: Steam Press of Church, Goodman, and Donnelley, 1865), 16; Edward Coles to Josiah Meigs, August 5, 1819, Letters Received, Miscellaneous, General Land Office, National Archives, cited in Rohrbough, Land Office Business, 139.

devastating effects of the state’s declining currency and contributed to the overall feeling that the people suffered from “hard Times.” Prior to the recession farmers sold their corn for between thirty-three and seventy-five cents and their wheat for as much as one dollar and forty-five cents a bushel. After 1819, most Illinois farmers were forced to accept prices as low as fifteen and twenty-five cents a bushel for corn and wheat respectively. Not only did the falling value of agricultural products diminish profits, but the low prices often exceeded the cost of transportation to market, causing most farmers to avoid the market all together. By 1823, Horatio Newhall, a resident of Bond County, concluded that “a farmer can no longer make his business . . . profitable.”

Coles’s position as Register of the Land Office as well as his experiences as a farmer made him intimately familiar with the economic problems created by the Panic of 1819. As he informed Josiah Meigs, the Commissioner of the General Land Office in Washington City, “Little or no land . . . has sold above two dollars per acre; and . . . if the list of Land Office Money be not enlarged,” he continued, “much of the little that has been sold will be forfeited.” Recognizing that reform was necessary, Congress revised the land laws in April 1820, reducing the price of land per acre from two to one dollar and twenty-five cents, as well as the minimum purchase requirement from one hundred and sixty to eight acres. Still, the scarcity of land office money, as Coles observed, continued to prevent prospective settlers from purchasing land and also threatened the ability of those who had already bought property to maintain ownership. Coles’s land office account

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book dramatically reflected the decline in land sales. Between July and October 1819, for example, he recorded collecting $30,762 for claims in his office. One year later, however, the revenue of his office declined precipitously. From July to October 1820, Coles sold only $6,275 worth of land.\textsuperscript{29}

Congress once again attempted to relieve the situation by passing new land regulations. The Relief Act of 1821 allowed landowners to relinquish portions of their earlier purchases and then re-buy smaller tracts of land at the new lower price without penalty. To the dismay of many settlers and land officers, the act required settlers to file their claims during such a short period of time that few landowners benefitted from the relief effort. Coles, for example, expressed "apprehension that there will not be sufficient time . . . to complete the business . . . in the time limited by law." Despite the efforts of national legislators, land sales continued to decline, and Coles's land office accounts continued to reflect the trend. During the fall of 1820 he earned only ninety-three dollars, and the following year his commission fell to thirty-one dollars. Coles did attempt to collect eight hundred dollars worth of fees "for filing Declarations and Relinquishments" in December 1821, but the Commissioner of the General Land Office disallowed these fees and Coles had to return the funds. After two years of working as Register, Coles had little income beyond his salary to show for his efforts.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{29}Edward Coles to Josiah Meigs, August 5, 1819, Letters Received, Miscellaneous, General Land Office, National Archives, cited in Rohrbough, \textit{Land Office Business}, 139; Coles, "Account Book, 1818-1839, Volume IV," Edward Coles Collection, HSP.

\textsuperscript{30}Edward Coles to Josiah Meigs, August 6, 1821, Letters Received, Register & Receiver, Edwardsville, General Land Office, National Archives, cited in Rohrbough, \textit{Land Office Business}, 146; Coles, "Account Book, 1818-1838, Volume IV," Edward Coles Collection, HSP.
Coles's farm accounts similarly reflected the economic devastation wrought by the 1819 recession. His start-up costs, which included payments for horses, a wagon, ploughs, seed, the services of a blacksmith, food and clothing for his laborers and their wages but not the price of his farm, amounted to just under six hundred and ninety dollars. With such a large outlay of cash, Coles needed to produce enough crops on the farm over the summer and fall of 1819 to not only feed his laborers, but also to sell on the market to recover his expenditures. He sold his two thousand bushels of corn at thirty cents a bushel and generated an income of six hundred dollars. The following year, when depression prices dominated, he only garnered twenty cents and thirty-three cents a bushel for his corn and wheat respectively, sums that greatly reduced his income. Additionally, with the death of Ralph, who was sick with fever for much of August and September, in October 1819, Coles, like some of his neighbors, hired other laborers, sometimes paying them cash, and on other occasions settling their account by barter. Consequently, the income of his farm suffered from both the detrimental effects of the economic recession and the necessity of paying high wages in a constrained labor pool. Like his plantation in Virginia, Coles’s Prairieland farm remained in debt the entire time he employed his ex-slaves. After 1824, Coles chose, like his neighbors, to rent his farm to local tenants rather than continue to operate it himself. Largely as a result of the economic problems of the 1820s, his goal of escaping debt by moving to the frontier proved elusive.\(^{31}\)

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\(^{31}\)Coles, “Account Book, 1818-1839, Volume IV,” Edward Coles Collection, HSP. Coles first rented his farm in 1824, after Robert and Kate chose to move onto their own land. Gershom Flagg and John Reynolds were two other prominent and successful farmers who pursued a similar strategy. See Gershom Flagg to Artemas Flagg, August 16, 1825, in Buck, ed., “Pioneer Letters of Gershom Flagg,” 177 and John Reynolds to Major Reynolds, May 3, 1823, John Reynolds Papers, ISHL.
Coles was surprised to observe that the economic conditions occasioned by the 1819 recession led the state’s politicians to reimpose restrictions against the immigration of free blacks and exposed in sharp relief the strong anti-black prejudices of the region’s residents. Fearful that the state’s residents would have to compete for land and wages with free blacks immigrating into the region, the Illinois state legislature passed a series of laws that became known as the black code. Promulgated in March 1819, Illinois’s black laws re-imposed the measures included in the 1813 territorial law entitled “An Act to prevent the Migration of Free Negroes and Mulattoes,” a law which stipulated that new free black settlers had to leave the state within fifteen days or risk a public whipping. Despite this restriction, the free black population grew significantly between 1818 and 1830, increasing fifty-nine percent between 1818 and 1820 and a remarkable two hundred and twenty-eight percent between 1820 and 1830. While many of them gained their freedom after serving out the terms of their indenture contracts or as a result of emancipations, the vast majority of the state’s growing free black population immigrated into the region. Indeed, in proportion to the state’s total population, the number of free blacks increased by a higher percentage in Illinois than in any other state in the Old Northwest or in the northern states of New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts.32

The persistence of free black immigration seemed only to renew the desire among many white residents for stricter black laws. Consequently, as a further deterrent to the

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immigration of free people of color, the 1819 regulations also required all free blacks who already resided in the region to prove their status by presenting a certificate of freedom to the local county clerk. They also were compelled to register themselves and each member of their family. Anyone who failed to do so was "deemed a runaway slave or servant," arrested, and hired out to the highest bidder. Like enslaved Southern blacks, free black residents in Illinois were also prohibited from assembling "in the number of three or more." Any black persons found attending assemblies defined as "riots, . . . unlawful," or involving "seditious speeches" were "punished with whipping," while their white counterparts received a monetary fine. In the spring of 1819, the state legislature also passed a statute declaring that black residents could not bear witness or bring suit against white inhabitants. Combined with the constitutional article restricting suffrage to "white male inhabitants above the age of twenty-one," these laws severely restricted free black civil liberties and made Illinois very inhospitable to free black settlement. 33

More than anything, these laws reflected the strong anti-black prejudices of many of Illinois's Southern-born residents, who migrated into the Old Northwest "to avoid the overshadowing influences of a slaveholding aristocracy whom they envied."

Consequently, they often expressed a natural opposition to anyone who displayed or

claimed elite status, preferring instead to emphasize their commitment to equality among the region’s white population. As the editor of the *Illinois Gazette* revealed, “Though the people are seldom intrusive, or troublesome, to those who do not seek their society, if you commence a conversation, they expect it to be continued on terms of equality, and are offended if you are less unreserved than themselves.” By moving to the frontier, then, many of these immigrants sought to free themselves from the political, social and economic oppression they endured in their previous homes.34

Such a distaste for the Southern social order and a desire for economic independence, however, rarely translated into an antislavery impulse. Instead, most white Southern-born Illinoisans retained “many prejudices imbibed in infancy,” and continued to “hold negroes in the utmost contempt, . . . look[ing] on nегers, as they called them, . . . as an inferior race of beings.”35 These settlers’s understanding of egalitarianism, then, could

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be both inclusive and exclusive simultaneously. Their expectations of mutuality and equality led them to aid other white immigrants who settled among them. Fordham observed that although they "are unpolished," many of the poor farmers he encountered were "hospitable, kind to Strangers, honest and trustworthy." After several weeks "with these men," he declared that "they would . . . give me the last shirt off their backs." At the same time, however, they limited who would benefit from their egalitarianism. In response to an inquiry demanding that he explain how he represented the wishes of "the people," William Kinney remarked that he only represented those with a legitimate claim to citizenship. Consequently, he excluded any "man of colour," as well as the French, from his definition of "the people." While they resented the social, political, and economic distinctions that placed them below the ruling elite, the poor Southern-born residents of Illinois even more vigorously demanded that blacks, whether enslaved or free, be defined as an inferior class.36

Coles and his ex-slaves experienced the force of this exclusive world view first hand. After working on Coles's farm for two years, Robert Crawford and Thomas Cobb, believing they could earn more money elsewhere, responded to a notice in the Edwardsville Spectator seeking laborers to work at an Edwardsville brick factory. Theophilis W. Smith, the proprietor of the enterprise, offered Crawford and Cobb each "$20 a month to labour . . . in making bricks." Coles, suspecting that the offer came from

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some "illdisposed and designing persons," advised the two men "to accept the offer, [only] if they could be sure of being paid, and that such wages would be continued for any length of time." Confident that the proposal was legitimate, Crawford and Cobb left Coles's employ. Within a few months, however, the two men returned to Prairieland farm "very much out of temper, to complain that they had been deceived and cheated." Smith had refused to pay them in silver as promised and instead insisted on providing their wages in state money, which amounted to just one third of the agreed-upon sum. Coles learned that neither man had secured a contract. Additionally, they possessed no evidence to support their claim, other than the testimony "of coloured persons, which, by our unrighteous laws, [was] not . . . admissible against a white man." Unable to return to Coles's farm because he had hired replacements for them, Crawford and Cobb were forced to accept the reduced wages for their labor and find other employment in the neighborhood for the remainder of the year.37

Still, in the long run, Coles's ex-slaves fared far better than not only most Illinois free blacks, but also the state's Southern-born poor farmers. Unlike other free people of color in Illinois, Ralph and Kate Crawford and Thomas Cobb owned land and enjoyed the aid of a white patron who was determined to help them overcome the obstacles imposed by an inhospitable frontier society. In 1822, for example, Robert, and possibly Thomas, returned to Coles's farm to resume their positions as hired laborers. Kate, widowed in October 1819, had remained with her children at Prairieland, working as a house servant.

37Coles, "Sketch of the Emancipation," October 1827, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. For the job advertisement, see Edwardsville Spectator, June 26, 1821 and "Replication by Warren, June 29, 1855," Free West, July 5, 1855, in Alvord, Governor Edward Coles, 363-64.
Sometime after 1822, she married Robert and for several years, they worked “as tenant[s]” on his nearly four hundred acre farm, paying Coles “ten bushels of corn per man,” a modest fee considering most tenants paid a bushel per four acres for rent.  

By 1832, the Crawfords had accumulated enough wealth to leave their ex-master’s employ and establish themselves on their own property. As Coles noted, rather than “removing to their unimproved lands,” Robert and Kate “purchased eighty acres” of improved land outside of Edwardsville. The property they bought, Coles revealed, had “good dwelling houses, stables, barns, [and] fruit trees,” in addition to “twenty or thirty acres . . . enclosed and in cultivation.” Indeed, the Crawfords prospered as independent farmers, eventually accumulating “400 acres . . . several horses, oxen, many cows, cattle, sheep, [and] hogs.” Their farm, proclaimed Coles, was “as large and as well stocked . . . and as neatly fixed as most of [their] . . . white neighbors.”

The experiences of most of Illinois’s free black population was very different. Like Robert Crawford and Thomas Cobb, many free black men and women encountered the

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38 Thomas Cobb appears in Coles’s account book for the last time on June 2, 1821, when Coles noted purchasing “9 yards of Linen for Tom.” See Coles, “Account Book, 1818-1839, Volume IV,” Edward Coles Collection, HSP. He may have died sometime after that entry, but it is unclear when or how. On rent, see Boggess, Settlement in Illinois, 166. He notes that the average rent was one peck of corn per acre per year. Four pecks equals a bushel. If Coles’s ex-slaves paid by the acre, their rent should have been seventy-three and half bushels of corn. Instead, they paid thirty bushels.

39 Coles, “Sketch of the Emancipation,” October 1827, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. Years later, William R. Prickett, the son of Coles’s Edwardsville agent and local store owner, Abraham Prickett, observed that Robert Crawford, or “Uncle Bob” as he was affectionately called, “was the aristocrat . . . [and] could read and write, was a preacher and a man of dignified carriage and manners.” Kate, his wife, he continued, similarly “upheld the dignified character of her husband.” See William R. Prickett to Melle C. Armstrong, August 16, 1919, Edward Coles Papers, ISHS. For land purchases see, Robert Crawford, 40 acres, Madison County, October 6, 1832 and Robert Crawford, 40 acres, Madison County, August 16, 1836, Public Land Records, Illinois State Archives. Coles claimed that he gave them an additional three hundred and twenty acres of adjacent land.
discrimination and prejudice that shaped Illinois society. In a legal case involving a free black man named Toney, for example, the jury acquitted the defendant, but, as the editor of the *Edwardsville Spectator* reported, the foreman offered an unusual reproach. "[A]s it appeared in evidence before them that the said negro Toney had not be very respectful of his superiors, the jury . . . recommend[ed]" that he receive "thirty-nine lashes on is bare back, well laid on." Five years later, conditions had hardly changed, when Charles Butler similarly suffered from the hostility of his white neighbors. In November of 1824, James A. Richardson brought Butler before the Gallatin County Justice of the Peace. After it became clear that he "has no papers with him to establish his freedom," Butler was imprisoned until he could prove his status or was claimed as a slave. For those free blacks who failed to develop personal ties to the white community akin to the paternalistic relationship the Crawfords cultivated with Coles, the frontier was fairly inhospitable and was far too similar to the racially charged environment they had endured in the South.\(^40\)

Perhaps most discouraging for free blacks who moved to Illinois, limited access to land undermined their ability to establish themselves as independent farmers. While the

majority of Illinois's free black population lived in households headed by free people of color, less than half a dozen families were like the Crawfords, and owned their own land. Samuel Winson and Nathan Titus, both residents of St. Clair County, were among the first free black property holders in the region when they purchased one hundred and sixty acres of land each in 1814 and 1816 respectively. When Crawford County resident Caleb Anderson purchased eighty acres in neighboring Lawrence County in the spring of 1822 and Teague Desheat acquired one hundred acres in the Turkey Hill settlement of St. Clair County the number of free black landowners increased to four. While some of them may have purchased land privately, the vast majority of Illinois’s free black heads of household were probably tenants on land owned by whites or squatters on unclaimed acreage.41

The experience of Coles’s ex-slaves, then, was the exception rather than the rule. While the majority of them inhabited households that were physically separate from their white neighbors, most of Illinois’s free black population was dependent in one way or another on their white neighbors for survival. Some rented land from white residents or

41 Of the three hundred and thirteen free blacks in Illinois in 1818, two hundred and thirty-two (or 74%) of them lived in fifty-one households headed by another free person of color. In 1820, roughly the same number of free blacks headed their households. Despite limited access to land, then, free blacks chose to rent or squat on land rather than live as laborers in white households. On black landownership, see Samuel Winson, 160 acres, September 16, 1814, Madison County; Nathan Titus, 160 acres, December 21, 1816, St. Clair County; Caleb Anderson, 80 acres, March 11, 1822, Lawrence County, Illinois Public Land Sales, ISA; Teague Desheat, 100 acres Turkey Hill, St. Clair County, St. Clair Tax Book, 1826 - Assessor's Book, 51, ISA. One other free black was assessed a tax in St. Clair County in 1826. Warrick Negro (Worrick Moore), a resident of Bellville, did not own any land, but paid a tax on fifty dollars worth of livestock. While other free blacks may have owned land by purchasing from private individuals, no tax records survive for the period prior to 1826 to confirm land ownership. Additionally, tax records for the post-1830 period are incomplete. See also Juliet E. K. Walker, Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983). Walker argues that most free black immigrants settled in towns, where they were more likely to find work and lodgings to rent. If they squatted on isolated farms in the wilderness as their white counterparts frequently did, they risked capture as runaway slaves or being run off their improved farms by white newcomers (98-100).
worked for wages in white households. Others squatted on unclaimed lands until a white immigrant came along to push them further west. Still others fell victim either to local vagrancy laws that punished those deemed unable to support themselves or the apathy of local residents who turned a blind eye when free blacks were kidnapped and sold as enslaved laborers outside of the state. Only a minority, like Ralph and Kate Crawford, achieved the freedom, economic independence, and nominal equality they sought by coming to Illinois. Shaped as much by the economic distress of the period as by the southern background of the state's residents, Illinois's society was particularly hostile to free black settlement, a state of affairs entirely contrary to Coles's expectations.

Coles likewise was surprised to learn that many residents attempted to avoid the economic distress of the period by employing enslaved laborers. Several months after their servant girl, Nelly, "had behaved badly" forcing them to "send her off," John and Christiana Holmes Tillson seized the opportunity to purchase the indentures contracts of two enslaved laborers from a close friend. Christiana claimed a "persistent feeling against slavery," but ultimately consented to retain Caleb and Lucy because "my kitchen labors were to be abated." The Tillsons were not the only Illinoisans who found it possible to see past their moral or ideological objections to slavery in order to benefit economically from the institution of slavery. Indeed, many residents agreed with an Englishman who settled in the region in 1817. "I would not have upon my conscience the moral guilt of extending Slavery over the countries now free from it. . . . But," he continued, "if it should take place, I do not see why I should not make use of it." Like many other new immigrants, he was finding it exceedingly difficult to succeed economically because without "servants I
cannot farm, and there are no free labourers here."

Coles only had to gaze about Edwardsville to witness the growing economic utility of enslaved labor in Illinois. When he arrived in 1819, just over sixteen percent of the town population was enslaved. Three prominent men, individuals who Coles associated with on a regular basis, owned the majority of the town's bound inhabitants. Benjamin Stephenson, who served as Register of the Land Office before Coles and was the proprietor of one of the town's stores, owned eight chattel laborers and Ninian Edwards and Jesse B. Thomas, the state's two senators, owned six and five respectively. Several town businessmen also relied on the aid of bound laborers. Robert Pogue, who owned and managed a town store, employed two slaves in his commercial enterprise. Similarly, James Mason, the proprietor of an Edwardsville boarding house where Coles lodged during the first few months of his stay in town, owned two female slaves who probably cooked and cleaned for his guests. As the main trading center in Madison County, Edwardsville was also the destination of many enslaved laborers traveling in and out of town as they collected and distributed produce and materials between the town and their master's farms in the hinterland.43

Many of the residents of Madison County likewise employed bound laborers as they attempted to navigate the economic dislocations caused by declining land and commodity values. In 1818, Madison County boasted forty-one slaveholders, possibly the

42Tillson, A Woman's Story of Pioneer Illinois, 138-41; Fordham, Personal Narrative, 210-12.

third highest collection in the state. By 1820, the number of households claiming to own enslaved laborers increased to forty-five, roughly fifty-percent of which were either new immigrants who brought chattel property with them into the region or individuals who already resided in Madison County, but who purchased a bound laborer after the 1818 census tally. Emanuel West, a native of Delaware, settled in Illinois in the fall of 1818 with two bound laborers who he employed in the fields of his four hundred acre farm, "Glorietta." Low Jackson, who settled in Madison County before Illinois became a state, purchased one male slave between the ages of fourteen and twenty-six sometime in 1819 and employed him on his farm in Wood River Township, an acquisition that increased his taxes to four hundred dollars. Although Madison County contained only the third largest slaveholding population in the state, Coles could not fail to observe the presence of enslaved laborers and the willingness of the region's residents to employ bound laborers was difficult to ignore.44

Indeed, Coles soon learned that the institution of slavery had a long history in the region; for slavery, in one way or another, had always existed in Illinois. French inhabitants, who initially settled in the Illinois Country in the 1680s, employed slaves on their wheat farms throughout the eighteenth century.45 The United States gained jurisdiction over the Illinois Country in 1784 and prohibited slavery in the region three

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44On Emanuel West, see Norton, Governor Edward Coles, 1010-02; "Tax List, 1820," in Pease, County Archives, 410 n2. I state that Madison County possibly contained the third largest number of slaveowners because census information for Randolph County was incomplete.

years later when the federal government passed the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Article VI of the act declared that “there shall be neither Slavery nor involuntary Servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in the punishment of a crime.”

Almost immediately, residents of the Old Northwest voiced their objections to the exclusion of slavery. Between 1790 and 1807 residents forwarded to Congress a series of petitions requesting the repeal of Article VI of the Northwest Ordinance. Despite the petitioner’s persistence, Congress consistently rejected or ignored the territorial residents’s requests and slavery, although present, remained illegal in the region north of the Ohio River.

Undeterred by their inability to repeal the slavery prohibition clause, the proslavery residents of the region circumvented Article VI by promulgating laws that concealed slavery behind the mask of indentured servitude. In 1809, when Illinois became a territory independent of Indiana, the territorial leadership adopted an Indiana law that made it legal “for any person being the owner or possessor of any negroes or mulattoes . . . owing service and labour as slaves . . . to bring said negroes or mulattoes into this territory.” Five years later, the governing elite restated their determination to shield the use of slave labor behind the veil of indentured servitude when they passed another law declaring that any slave contracted to serve a master in Illinois “shall for the time being be considered

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46"An Ordinance For the Government of the Territory of the United States, North-west of the River Ohio, July 13, 1787," reprinted in Philbrick, ed., 
Pape’s Digest, 1815 (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1938), I: 15-29. Regarding the creation of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, see Onuf, 
Statehood and Union.

47For the petitions, see Jacob Piatte Dunne, ed., “Slavery Petitions and Papers,” Indiana 
Historical Society Publications 2 (Indianapolis, 1894), 445-529. See also Finkelman, Slavery and the 
Founders, 48-55, 58-67; Onuf, Statehood and Union, 116-23; Berwanger, Frontier Against Slavery, 8-9.
and treated as an indentured servant.”

Despite the shift in terminology, the distinction between slave and servant was more chimerical than real. Although the law required the slave voluntarily to agree to the contract, the threat of sale to the Deep South was real enough to compel slaves to agree to the indenture contracts. Additionally, although the law stipulated that the contracts could only last for a “term not exceeding twelve months,” slaveowners routinely indentured their servants for as few as thirty and often as many as ninety-nine years, effectively ensuring the enslavement of most black laborers for the majority, if not all, of their natural lives. Indenture contracts, like slave property, could also be sold or bequeathed to other individuals. Just like Southern slavery, the condition of the indentured parent passed to his or her children. The laws passed by the territorial legislature declared that any child born to “a parent of colour, owing service or labor by indenture” was required to serve his or her parent’s master, “the male until the age of thirty, and the female until the age of twenty-eight.” Like Southern slaves, indentured servants endured a condition that was inherently involuntary, lasted nearly their entire lives and passed from one generation to the next. By the close of the territorial period in 1818, the proslavery residents and politicians in Illinois established a de facto slave system that was certainly slavery in practice if not in name.

In April 1818, just one year before Coles settled in Edwardsville, Congress passed an enabling act instructing the residents of Illinois to draft a constitution and granted them

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49 Ibid.
permission to petition for entrance into the Union. Recognizing that Congress would not accept an overtly proslavery document, the delegates to the 1818 constitutional convention approved a constitution that prohibited the further introduction of slaves. In an attempt to highlight their supposedly antislavery sympathies, the delegates adopted the same language employed by the framers of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. The final draft of the constitution declared that “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude” would hereafter be introduced into the state “otherwise than in the punishment of a crime.” The new document also proclaimed that “No person bound to labor in any other state” could be “hired to labor” in Illinois, except at the Gallatin County Saline until 1825.

Furthermore, any indentures contracted either within or beyond Illinois’s borders exceeding one year were not “of the least validity” and those bound to labor had to agree to their term of service while “in a perfect state of freedom,” otherwise the contract could be revoked. From the perspective of most delegates and many residents the constitution submitted for congressional approval in the fall of 1818 adhered to the instructions laid out in Congress’s enabling act. They had fashioned a document that was not in the least bit contrary to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.  

Indeed, Coles had attended the constitutional convention in Kaskaskia. As a spectator in the summer of 1818, he observed that slavery “formed a prominent topic in the political discussion” as the delegates argued over the basic components of the new constitution. Coles maintained that the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 had “prohibited

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[slavery] by law.” He reasoned that slaveholders only continued to employ enslaved labor because the institution was “tolerated by custom, [and] aided by ignorance.” As far as he was concerned, the failure of the proslavery petitions to repeal Article VI of the Ordinance had settled the issue. Anyone who continued to hold bound laborers afterward, did so “in violation of the ordinance.” Coles admitted that “Many, but not a majority,” of the delegates to the constitutional convention favored “making Illinois a slaveholding state,” but he believed that more republican attitudes prevailed, insisting that the new constitution forbade any future toleration of slavery or involuntary servitude. The commitment to the republican ideal of a harmonious social order he acquired while a student at the College of William and Mary, together with his strong belief in the agrarian vision Jefferson espoused for the region north of the Ohio River, led Coles to leave the convention convinced that Illinois would enter the Union free of slavery.

As Coles would learn one he settled in the region, however, the rhetoric of the Illinois constitution really only showcased enough antislavery sentiment to secure the approval of Congress. The substance of the document and the latitude enjoyed by slaveowners throughout the state during the initial years of statehood hardly reflected the ordinance’s antislavery spirit. Despite Coles’s impression, the 1818 constitution

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protected and perpetuated the slave system established during the territorial period.

Section 1 of Article VI of the Illinois constitution prohibited the introduction of slavery and involuntary servitude after 1818, but permitted those who already owned slaves in Illinois to retain their bound laborers indefinitely. Section 2 excluded the Gallatin County Salines near Shawneetown from the prohibition, allowing the managers of that important source of state revenue to employ slaves until 1825. Section 3 confirmed the validity of all existing indentures in Illinois, reminding residents that all contracts remained binding. This final section also guaranteed the owners of indentured servants that they would continue to benefit from the labor of any children born to bound laborers until the boys and girls reached the ages of twenty-one and eighteen respectively. Significantly, Illinois became the only state created out of the Old Northwest Territory that failed to abolish slavery outright during its constitutional convention.

Thus, slavery persisted throughout the territorial period and continued to function unchallenged during the early years of statehood. Indeed, the slave system seemed to be expanding during the initial years of Coles’s residence in the Prairie State. Although slaveholders and slaves only accounted for a fraction of the total population, the number of slaveowners between 1818 and 1820 increased by roughly twenty-four percent, or from 777 to 991. Significantly, more than forty percent of the state’s 1820 slaveowners were new to the category, either slaveholding immigrants who settled in Illinois after 1818 or

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residents who acquired slave property sometime between the two census tallies. Robert
Collet, for example, settled in Wood River Township in Madison County in 1819 with
four slaves. Similarly, Tilghiman H. West, who immigrated to Illinois in the fall of 1818,
brought seven slaves with him when he settled in St. Clair County. Slaveowners also
imported, bought, and sold slaves on the open market with relative ease. Soon after
Robert Collet settled in Madison County, he purchased another enslaved laborer from
George Stout, a resident of St. Clair County. For the price of six hundred dollars, Collet
acquired Milly, a twenty-four year old mulatto woman who owed thirty-two years of
service. In the February 1, 1820 issue of the *Edwardsville Spectator* a resident advertised
the sale “of an indentured NEGRO WOMAN, who has upwards of thirty years to serve.”
To entice prospective buyers, the solicitor noted that “she is an excellent cook.” To
Coles’s chagrin, Illinois residents possessed little fear that their right to hold slaves would
be challenged.

Perhaps most disturbing to Coles, the persistent economic problems, combined
with the smoldering Missouri controversy, threatened to transform the slavery issue into
an increasingly divisive political issue throughout the state. He first noticed the power of

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55For census statistics, see Norton, ed., *Illinois Census Returns 1810, 1818 and Illinois Census
Returns 1820*. Indentures by Tilghiman H. West of William, Peter, and Patrick, December 1, 1818, St.
Clair County; Indenture by Tilghiman H. West of Delila, December 5, 1818, St. Clair County; and
Indentures by Tilghiman H. West of William Winston and Moses, December 8, 1818, St. Clair County, in
“Servitude Register,” St. Clair County, ISA.

56Indenture by George Stout of Milly, February 23, 1811, St. Clair County, in “Servitude
Register,” St. Clair County; Bill of Sale, George Stout to Robert Collet, January 12, 1819, for Milly,
Spectator*, February 1, 1820. For similar advertisements, see *Edwardsville Spectator*, March 28 and
October 24, 1820, January 23, June 5, and October 9, 1821; *Kaskaskia Republican*, January 22, 1824. See
also Harris, *The History of Negro Servitude in Illinois*, 12-14
this combination in the summer of 1819, when Illinoisans were trying to decide between two candidates for the state’s lone congressional seat. Throughout the summer months, editorials continually asked, “Will th admission of slavery in anew state tend to increase its population?,” a condition many residents equated with economic improvement. This particular editorialist suspected that the claim that “its admission would . . . attract the attention of the wealthy southern planter, [but] . . . not deter the industrious northern farmer,” two groups who would bring money into the state and look to purchase land, was false.57

Similarly, the growing concern for the region’s economic well-being led these same editorialists to compare incumbent John M’Lean’s stance on the slavery issue with the views of his challenger, Daniel Pope Cook. Cole’s increasingly close associate George Churchill, for example, penned several editorials under the name “Aristides” charging that M’Lean’s vote in favor of the Missouri statehood bill had “proved him illy qualified to represent a just, free, and independent state.” In his place, Churchill recommended Cook, a man he claimed more accurately reflected the character and moral of his constituency, “a people too enlightened to be ignorant of their rights.” From Churchill’s perspective, Cook’s opposition to the expansion of slavery ensured that his victory over M’Lean would “secure the triumph of republicanism and freedom” in Illinois. Voters, then, were increasingly encouraged to employ the slavery issue as a litmus test for their candidates, a development that simultaneously inspired more inhabitants to participate in the political process and increased tensions among residents who possessed conflicting visions of the

57Editorial, quoted in Boggess, Settlement of Illinois, 180-81.
economic policies the region should pursue.58

During Coles's first years in Illinois rumors claiming that a group of men, known as "the Old Slave Party," were conspiring to legalize slavery also circulated throughout the community. As Joseph Gillespie later recalled, "the slavery propagandists contended that you could, the next day after being admitted under an antislavery constitution, change the constitution so as to admit slavery." To that end, "a strong party in favor of slavery," reported one editorialist, contrived to accomplish their object by "supporting those who were in favor of it . . . [in] state appointments, endeavor[ed] to procure federal ones," and subjected those who refused to join their cause to "unrelenting persecution." These rumors turned to substantiated accusation in July 1820, when Hooper Warren announced that "a plan was formed in the City of Washington" by the state's representatives and others "for the purpose of calling a convention to authorize the importation of slaves."59

The most visible machination on the part of the slave party, as least as far as Coles, Warren and several editorialists were concerned, appeared in the candidacy of Elias Kent Kane, Daniel Pope Cook's challenger for Illinois's seat in the House of Representatives in 1820. Throughout the campaign, editorialists continually attempted to associate Kane with the slave party. "Did not both the governor [Shadrach Bond] and Secretary [Kane],"


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asked "Another Citizen of Illinois," "warmly support Mr. M'Lean for Congress . . . [and] does not the Governor, with the most active of the old slave party, now support Mr. Cane for Congress?" Echoing these remarks, another editorialist suggested that Kane had identified himself "with the 'slave party'" because the members of that group "supported you in the [1818 constitutional] convention - [and] they support you now." More importantly, he charged that "from that time to this [Kane had] . . . acted and counselled [sic] with them, [and] entertained the same opinions." For both authors, these coincidence could not be ignored.®®

Other editorialists were more forceful in their assertions. One author proclaimed that "[a]ctions speak louder than words. The people will keep in mind," he warned, "who are Kane's political associates, and they will not forget his sentiments and conduct as a member of our convention." Yet another writer assured his readers that the slave party "have brought out the most distinguished champion [Kane] which they had in the convention" to challenge Cook's re-election. As "One of the People" concluded, the residents of Illinois already boasted two representatives who "advocated and support measures which its citizens cannot approve – they do not want a third."®

Kane hopelessly tried to deny any connection between himself and the reputed slave party. In a letter to the voters, published in the Edwardsville Spectator just over a week before the election, he assured the electors that it was "[f]rom them, not from [a]

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®®"From the Illinois Intelligencer, To Elias Kent Kane," signed "One of the People," Edwardsville Spectator, July 11 and August 1, 1820.

®"From the Illinois Intelligencer, To Elias Kent Kane," signed "One of the People" and "For the Spectator," unsigned, Edwardsville Spectator, July 18, 1820.
faction, I wish support.” “I owe allegiance to none,” he continued, and informed the public that any merit he had obtained was the product “of my own exertions,” making him “under no obligations to consult the desires of any party of men.” Kane then insisted that “I am as much opposed” to the legalization of slavery in Illinois “as any man.” As for his “pledge for its introduction” during the 1818 constitutional convention, he explained that he had only followed the instructions of his constituents, a practice that was “with me a first principle in politics.” To Coles’s delight, Kane’s bid for Congress was unsuccessful and the antislavery candidate, Daniel Pope Cook, was re-elected. Still, the congressional contests of 1819 and 1820 revealed to Coles the extent to which his fellow-residents disagreed about the slavery issue and the determination of some of the region’s political leaders to see the institution legalized.62

In many ways, Illinois society simultaneously fulfilled and defied Coles’s expectations. As he had anticipated, Edwardsville and the region as a whole exhibited an immature social order that paled in comparison to the society he had enjoyed east of the Appalachian Mountains. Still, the state did boast a respectable wealthy and politically prominent ruling elite, a group of men Coles assumed he would be counted among when he arrived. His appointment as Register of the Land Office along with his genteel background, personal connections with Monroe, Madison, and Jefferson, as well as his previous political experience together ensured that his assumption became a reality. To his disappointment, however, Coles quickly discovered that his new home hardly lived up

62Editorial, by Elias Kent Kane, Edwardsville Spectator, July 25, 1820. Kane’s claim to be antislavery was probably somewhat dubious since he owned at least five slaves. See Norton, ed., Illinois Census Returns, 1820, 238. See also Buck, Illinois in 1818, 257.
to the impressions he had formed of Illinois during his earlier tours of the area. Rather than a region bubbling with economic prosperity, he found a state plagued by economic distress. Instead of an environment receptive to an experiment in black freedom, the Prairie State contained a population and legal structure decidedly hostile to free black settlement. Perhaps most surprising of all, Coles arrived in the spring of 1819 only to observe that slavery was not only becoming an increasingly divisive issue among his new neighbors, but was also expanding as an institution. Together, these conditions led him to conclude that his new home was far more similar to the Virginia he let behind than the free state he imagined it to be, a state of affairs that caused him to agree with another antislavery immigrant who declared that Illinois was "as much a slave state as any south of the Ohio River."^{63}

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On July 4, 1819, Edward Coles sat at his desk in the Edwardsville Land Office, composing the certificates of freedom for the chattel property he emancipated on the Ohio River three months earlier. Outside he could hear the residents of the town celebrating the nation's independence with the discharge of artillery. As he gazed through his window he could see an American flag several inhabitants had hoisted atop "a lofty liberty pole" waving in the wind. It was amidst this atmosphere that Coles expressed formally his reasons for liberating his enslaved laborers. In documents filed the following fall, he declared that "whereas I do not believe that man can have of right a property, in his fellow

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man, but on the contrary that all man kind were endowed by nature with equal rights, I do therefore by these presents restore . . . that inalienable liberty to which they have been deprived.” For Coles, the moment as well as the content of the composition was part of a self-conscious effort to link his antislavery principles to the nation’s revolutionary heritage.  

When he completed the documents, Coles joined the procession of prominent citizens who marched down Edwardsville’s main street to W. C. Wiggins’s tavern where a public dinner was scheduled to occur. After General Robert Hopkins, “one of the few surviving soldiers of the revolution,” read aloud the Declaration of Independence, Coles and his fellow-revelers “sat down to an excellent dinner.” As the editor of the Edwardsville Spectator reported, “After the cloth was removed, the following toasts were drunk, accompanied by appropriate songs.” Flushed with the pride of following through with his convictions, Coles offered a toast to “The Rights of Man,” declaring that “[t]hey appertain equally to him, whether his complexion be white, red, or black.”

Many of the other attendees shared Coles’s enthusiasm for the nation’s republican heritage. George Churchill, for example, raised his glass to “the cause of liberty

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64 “Deed of Emancipation,” for Robert Crawford, Polly Crawford, Ralph Crawford, Kate Crawford, and their children, Betsy, Thomas, Mary and William, Nancy Gaines, and Thomas Cobb, signed by Edward Coles, in Peggy Lathrop Sapp, ed., Madison County Court Records, 1813-1818 and Indenture Records, 1805-1826 (Springfield: Folk Works Research, 1993), 101-04. The deeds of emancipation were not filed until November 19, 1819, when Coles learned that the freedom papers he had given to his newly-freed blacks would be ineffective.

throughout the world.” Similarly, Abraham Prickett called the audience’s attention to the
efforts of the residents of Missouri to enter the Union as a slave state when he proclaimed:
“May every attempt to extend . . . tyranny in the United States meet with the
disapprobation which becomes a free and enlightened people.” Few disagreed that “The
freemen of the United States” were the nation’s “political Sampson – If [their] . . . locks
are shaven” they felt confident that “the pillars of the constitution” would sustain them and
ensure the survival of the republican experiment.66

All of these men shared a common vision of Illinois as a prosperous, enlightened
and republican society. During the course of the festivities, they celebrated the region’s
access to national markets by describing the beauty and strength of the Mississippi and
Illinois Rivers. They championed the potential productivity of the Prairie State’s
unprecedented fertility and inviting climate. They also paid tribute to the character of
those who settled in Illinois, describing them as a people particularly committed to
freedom and independence. From their perspective, Illinois offered its residents as well as
anyone else who chose to make the Prairie State their new home the opportunity to
contribute to and sustain the republican society they had gathered to commemorate.

Just under the surface of these celebratory declarations, however, pulsed a subtle
undercurrent of tension over the place of slavery in the West. Certainly, several residents
voiced their adamant opposition to slavery in Illinois and its extension into Missouri,
claiming the absence of slavery to be an essential component of their republican vision for
the region and the nation. Benjamin Spencer, a resident of Alton, expressed the hope that

66Ibid.
Illinois’s “liberties never be sullied by slavery or oppression.” Others, however, chose to reveal their views in less readily identifiable ways. Theophilis W. Smith, for example, remained silent on the slavery issue, but praised the leadership of Illinois senator Ninian Edwards, a man some residents criticized for supporting Missouri statehood. By singling out Edwards, Smith implied that only the ex-territorial governor’s brand of leadership could generate a particularly republican social order. Still others misrepresented their views. Nicholas Hanson, who delivered a public oration in Edwardsville, declared that slaveholders possessed “hearts . . . scared by avarice beyond the reach of human woes,” and warned that “this jubilee would . . . be profaned by the unhallowed recollection of our own abuse of power.” Yet, privately he supported the legalization of slavery in Illinois, a development he felt sure would improve the region’s economic standing. Along with Smith, he would emerge as a leader of a group of Illinoisans who sought to revise the constitution to ensure Illinois became a slaveholding state.67

As the collection of statements proclaimed in the summer of 1819 as well as Coles’s experiences during the first two years of his residence in Illinois revealed, not only was the Prairie State’s political leadership in favor of legalizing slavery, but the majority of the state’s inhabitants were deeply divided over the issue. To his surprise, Coles learned that as they struggled to overcome the economic hardships imposed by the 1819 recession, the residents of the region exhibited a strong prejudice against free blacks and a willingness to privilege their own desire for independence over the freedom of others.

particularly enslaved laborers, views he feared could be transformed into support for the legalization of slavery. This state of affairs led Coles to conclude that if Illinois was ever to fulfill his expectations, he would have to step forward, as Jefferson had called on him to do in Virginia, to ensure that the interests of the region's non-slaveholding small-farming majority remained focused on economic independence and the absence of slavery.

Within a few years of his arrival in Illinois, then, Coles discovered that he had more in common with Illinois's poor Southern-born small-farming majority than with the region's political leaders. Unlike the ruling elite who owned slaves, attempted to control the distribution of land to their benefit, and hoped to legalize slavery, he adamantly opposed owning bound laborers, pledged to oversee the equitable conveyance of public lands, and was determined to prevent the expansion of the slave system. Although he shared with his elite counterparts prominent political associates, considerable wealth, and political experience, Coles empathized more with Illinois's small-farming majority, who opposed slavery and envisioned a frontier community populated by free and independent farmers. Coles did not share, however, these aspiring landowners's strong aversion to free blacks. But, as he soon learned, if he intended Illinois to remain a free state, he would have to overlook, or more specifically, manipulate, the prejudices of these residents to prevent the expansion of the institution of slavery.

Most importantly, his new-found allegiance to his less-well-to-do neighbors forced Coles to reconsider his claim to authority. Previously, he aspired to acquire the political skills and knowledge, as well as the habits of civility, necessary for him to move smoothly in and out of the refined political communities of the nation's capital, Philadelphia, and
abroad, a brand of influence he carried with him when he immigrated to Illinois. As a presidential appointee on the frontier, he continued to exert his authority in ways very similar to the methods he had employed while James Madison's private secretary. He continued to rely on the appearance and display of civility as well as the performance of authority to fulfill his official duties as Register of the Land Office. The persistence of slavery, strength of prejudice against free blacks, and declining economic conditions in Illinois, however, demanded that Coles reconfigure his role of authority for a new and unfamiliar constituency, a constituency increasingly resentful of elite pretensions to and assumptions of power.
In mid-April 1821, just two years after leaving his native state of Virginia to settle in Illinois, Edward Coles wrote home to his niece, Mary Carter, complaining that “this new Country” offered few amusements except the “dull routine” of the land office “in which there is little to excite.” More than anything, he continued to miss the “thousand[s] of objects, both animate and inanimate,” of home that “excite the livelyest emotions.” Of some interest, however, was the news that Coles had been “solicited by some of the first citizens in this part of the state to become a candidate” in the upcoming gubernatorial election. His primary opponent, he informed his niece, was Joseph B. Phillips, “the present Chief Justice of the State, who has already declared himself a candidate.” Although flattered by the honor bestowed on him by the invitation, Coles hesitated to accept the offer. “In the first place,” he confessed, “I am doubtful whether I am not too poor, and in the next place,” he wondered “whether it will not be productive of more trouble pain and vexation than of pleasure and happiness.” Despite his apprehensions, Coles eventually consented to run for office, announcing his candidacy in October 1821 and, thereby, launched a political career destined to enhance a life made dull by the
ordinary routine of the land office and his farm.¹

Coles decided to accept the invitation of his friends against his better-judgment for several reasons. First and foremost, he knew from observing the state’s congressional contests and the controversy over Missouri statehood that a small, but very influential, group of Illinoisans wanted to legalize slavery. If they successfully placed a proslavery candidate in office, he feared they might accomplish their goal. Second, he understood from the experiences of his newly-freed slaves that most of Illinois’s Southern-born small farming majority strongly resented the presence of free blacks. He was concerned that the proslavery elite might try to mobilize the region’s non-slaveholding majority behind their cause by drawing a connection between the free black population and the state’s poor economic condition. Third, Coles felt compelled to run for office by a sense of duty. As an enlightened man of sensibility who was charged with the responsibility of ensuring the survival of the republican experiment, he felt honor-bound to pursue a position of authority that would allow him to fulfill his destiny. Coles viewed the governorship, then, as an opportunity to wield his public authority to define the type of society Illinois would become. He was determined to transform the Prairie State into the harmonious republican society he had thought it would be when he immigrated in 1819.

Just as Coles had failed to realize the true character of Illinois society before he settled in Edwardsville, however, so too did he misunderstand the political transformations occurring in the Prairie State during the 1820s. Traditionally, deference toward elites,

¹Edward Coles to Mary Carter, April 18, 1821, Carter-Smith Family Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia (hereafter UVA). For his declaration of candidacy, see Edwardsville Spectator, October 30, 1821.
whose education and wealth established their qualifications for leadership, guided and shaped voter behavior in an election. Beginning in 1819, however, a dramatic transformation began to unfold. Shocked by the behavior of their representatives in Congress during the Missouri controversy, Illinois voters gradually shed their habits of deference and began to reconsider the traditional practice of conceding leadership authority to a recognizable group of natural aristocrats. Inspired by the public’s growing opposition to the expansion of slavery, editorialists and voters defended the people’s right to instruct their representatives and hold them accountable when their actions ran counter to the expectations of their constituents. To their dismay, as elites attempted to negotiate the state’s changing political terrain by discrediting particular candidates and supported others they allowed voters to expand their influence in the region’s political culture, and, in the process, helped transform Illinois’s elections into issue-based contests in which candidates could not help but recognize that their success depended upon gaining the support of the people. By the 1820s, then, political power was shifting out of the hands of the elite and into the grasp of the general electorate.

Changes in the nation’s political culture during the first decades of the nineteenth century has inspired considerable study. Most historians of the Early American Republic place the origins of partisan politics in the rising tensions over economic and political dissatisfaction. In Illinois, however, discontent over the leadership when faced with the issue of slavery provoked a partisan response that politicized the electorate and produced important lessons for the future. I am not arguing that the partisan organizing of this period led directly to the party organizations of the Jacksonian Era. Instead, I would encourage historians to embrace causes other than economy as they try to explain why voters attempted to wrest control of the political process away from elites. Additionally, by looking at elections and issues that emerged during the 1820s, we may gain a better understanding of the political developments of the 1830s. Regarding the decline of deference and the rise of partisan politics generally, see Ronald P. Formisano, “Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic’s Political Culture, 1789-1840,” The American Political Science Review 68 (June 1974), 473-87; Emil Pocock, “Popular Roots of Jacksonian Democracy: The Case of Dayton, Ohio, 1815-1830,” Journal of the Early Republic 9 (Winter 1989), 489-515; and Daniel Durpe, “Barbecues and Pledges: Electioneering and the Rise of Democratic Politics in Antebellum Alabama,” Journal of Southern History 60 (1994), 479-512. See also Robert Wiebe, Opening of
Despite these changes, some old-style political habits persisted. More often than not, candidates boasted elite status and strong political connections to regional and national leaders as they sought the support of the electorate. Additionally, political aspirants continued to nominate themselves for office and voters remained suspicious of political parties, caucuses and factions. Consequently, there were no formal political parties, organized meetings or party platforms. Instead, deferential and participant political habits existed simultaneously, each influencing the political culture to differing degrees on different occasions.

No event revealed the convergence of these two political trends more than Edward Coles's pursuit of the governorship in 1822. In an election that lacked a single candidate with a state-wide reputation, any of the four individuals running for office possessed an equal chance to emerge victorious. Coles sought to highlight particular aspects of his own reputation that could be identified with each tradition. On the one hand, his genteel heritage, wealth, and status placed him among those men identified as potential leaders in the community. When combined with his personal and political connections to the nation's respected political leaders, few residents could deny that Coles possessed the qualities of a natural aristocrat. On the other hand, Coles publically confessed his

antislavery convictions and in the process identified himself with the most visible and important political issue in the state. Additionally, he willingly employed some of the popular political tactics voters began to expect from those who sought their support. In this way, he aligned himself with the state’s emerging popular political habits, habits that focused on issues rather than personalities.

Together, then, Coles’s determination to promote the development of a republican society without slavery and his desire to redefine his own claim to authority for a new constituency of poor Southern-born farmers ultimately led him to ignore his personal reservations. Throughout the campaign he emphasized his previous political experience, connection to prominent national politicians, and his opposition to slavery. To his disappointment, this strategy provoked as much opposition as support for his candidacy as editorialists attempted to discredit him by consistently characterizing his campaign style as evidence of his ambition and self-interest. He attempted to counteract the growing opposition to his candidacy by combining the political lessons he had absorbed while in Washington City, the habits of sociability and civility that had proven so essential to his political success east of the Appalachian Mountains, with the more popular political practices of the frontier. He campaigned vigorously, touring the state, visiting taverns as well as the homes of both humble and prominent residents, and published letters in the press. Coles believed that all of his previous experiences had prepared him to assume a leadership role. No longer merely an assistant who helped manipulate the gears of a national political machine, Coles faced an opportunity to lead in his own right, and in the process, redefine the character of Illinois society. Ironically, however, as he pursued the
governorship Coles participated in and contributed to the very political changes that would eventually undermine his ability to exercise public authority.

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In October 1821, nearly six months after he informed his niece that some local residents had approached him, Coles announced his candidacy for the governorship in the Edwardsville Spectator. Fearful that Illinois’s proslavery political elite would use the highest office in the state to legalize slavery and aware of the breadth of anti-black prejudice among the region’s inhabitants, Coles recognized immediately that the campaign would provoke a great deal of excitement throughout the state. Indeed, James Riggins, a resident of Troy, Illinois, confirmed Coles’s prediction when he confided to his brother in Sangamon County that the “Politics in this Country will run higher than they ever have before.” Nathaniel Buckmaster, a resident of Madison County, echoed Riggins’s characterization, describing the state as “overwhelmed in a sea of politics.” Similarly, Horatio Newhall, a Massachusetts physician who settled in Bond County in 1820, informed his brothers that “when party politics were at the highest peak in Massachusetts, there was, probably never an election more warmly contested” than the 1822 Illinois gubernatorial race.3

From the outset, Coles understood that the candidate who secured the support of the state’s small-farming majority would win the contest. From his perspective, he

3 Announcement, Edwardsville Spectator, October 30, 1821; James Riggins to Harry Riggins, April 2, 1822, Riggins Family Papers, Folder 1; Nathaniel Buckmaster to John Buckmaster, April 14, 1822, Buckmaster-Curran Papers, Box 1, Folder 3; and Horatio Newhall to [J&J] Newhall, April 19, 1822, Horatio Newhall Papers, Folder 1, Illinois State Historical Library (hereafter ISHL).
possessed a number of assets that made him an attractive candidate. As Register of the
Land Office, he developed an extensive network of acquaintances among the region’s
farming community, making him familiar to the voting public. By contrast, General James
B. Moore, who did not enter the contest until March 1822, had “acquired some celebrity
as a military man” during the War of 1812 but remained unknown “beyond the Counties in
his vicinity.” Although the other two candidates, Thomas C. Browne and Joseph B.
Phillips, both boasted a degree of popularity that rivaled Coles’s, neither man was as
intimately familiar with the economic problems average Illinoisans had endured over the
previous two years. Not only did Coles experience similar financial woes, but he also
functioned as an advocate for those residents who attempted to take advantage of federal
relief measures, even canceling his plans to visit his family and friends in Virginia and
Philadelphia so he could remain in Edwardsville to oversee the administration of the relief
program during the spring of 1821. Although his position ensured his membership among
the state’s elite, Coles’s post as Register also expanded his popularity and helped him
forge a bond of mutual trust with many of the farming residents of the state.4

Coles also viewed his extensive political experience in Washington City and abroad
as an important qualification for office. His tenure as the President’s private secretary in
particular, assured that he was familiar with the mechanics of running a government and
the responsibilities, as well as the difficulties, of an executive when governing in

4John Reynolds, My Own Times: Embracing Also the History of My Life (1879; reprint, Ann
Arbor: University Microfilms, 1968), 158; John Reynolds, Pioneer History of Illinois, Containing the
Discovery, in 1673, and the History of the Country to the Year Eighteen Hundred and Eighteen, When the
State Government was Organized (Chicago: Fergus Printing Company, 1887), 112-14 and 194; William
H. Brown, Historical Sketch of the Early Movement in Illinois for the Legalization of Slavery (Chicago:
Steam Press of Church, Goodman and Donnelley, 1865), 19.
conjunction with a legislature. This characteristic of Coles’s reputation, however, hardly distinguished him from the other candidates. Moore had never served in public office, but his military career furnished him with leadership experience. Both Browne and Phillips had served in the territorial government and on the State Supreme Court after 1818; so, they too, could claim to possess the experience required to perform the responsibilities of the governorship effectively. Additionally, Coles’s previous political experiences exposed a weakness in his candidacy. Unlike all the other candidates who had lived in Illinois for many years and boasted strong ties to the region, Coles arrived relatively recently and, therefore, appeared more connected to national than local political leaders. He also continued to refer to Virginia, rather than Illinois, as his home. Together, these characteristics had the potential to lead voters to question his commitment to Illinois.

Coles believed, however, that his outspoken opposition to slavery would counteract this particular liability. Unlike his opponents, he was determined to prevent the expansion of slavery, a system he claimed undermined the prosperity of the region and threatened the stability of the nation. He knew from observing the 1819 and 1820 congressional elections as well as the local debate on Missouri statehood that a significant majority of the state’s inhabitants opposed the westward expansion of slavery. This did not mean they wanted, like Coles, to see slavery abolished. Instead, most residents simply objected to its introduction locally and believed slavery should remain unchallenged where it already existed. Coles also understood that a strong aversion to blacks, enslaved and free, similarly limited the extent of most Illinoisan’s antislavery sensibility. Still, Coles believed that his decision to emancipate his enslaved laborers would distinguish him from
the other candidates and make him an attractive choice on election day.5

Armed with these potential advantages, Coles orchestrated a campaign designed to highlight his particular strengths, a strategy that required him to combine the political lessons he had refined in Washington City with the more popular political practices emerging on the frontier. When he announced his intention to run for office, for example, Coles claimed that he came forward only “in compliance with the wishes of his friends.” By casting himself as a disinterested candidate, Coles sought to identify himself with a classical republican tradition best personified by Cincinnatus and George Washington. Rather than motivated by self-interest or ambition, Coles assured his audience, he pursued public office only because he was committed to promoting the common good.6

At the same time, he also acknowledged the increasing importance of being perceived as an independent man when he informed the electorate “that he came out on his own bottom, that he was neither Edwards’s man nor Thomas’s man.” Unlike his opponents, Joseph B. Phillips and Thomas C. Browne, both of whom owed allegiance to the Thomas/Kane and Edwards party respectively, he was not beholden to anyone. Accordingly, he implied that the voters could trust that he would privilege the interests of


6Announcement, by Edward Coles, Edwardsville Spectator, October 30, 1821.

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the entire population over his own as well as any small group of ruling elites.\(^7\)

The perception of disinterestedness and independence was crucial on the frontier during the early nineteenth century. Most immigrants moved to the west to escape the economic and political dependence they had encountered in their native states. As James Hall observed, "independence is not nominal -- it is actual, defined, and in the possession of every individual. It is not confined to civil and political rights," he continued, "but extends to every sphere of human action." He confessed that most of the men he encountered on the frontier believed that they "are not only independent of foreign governments, as a nation, but of our rulers as a people, and each other as men."

Consequently, they expected those they supported with their votes to display a similar degree of pride in their ability to remain unburdened by loyalties or commitments to the local ruling elite.\(^8\)

In Illinois, this was becoming increasingly the case. During both the 1819 and 1820 congressional contests, voters became ever more skeptical of the leadership of a natural aristocracy and generally disapproved of many of the assumptions to authority made by those who sought their support. Several editorialists, for example, questioned the propriety of supporting "Self-nominated" candidates, warning that they were generally "elected not for superior worth, but either through greater depth of purse, or the higher flavor of their viands and liquors." Instead, these authors encouraged the public to

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\(^7\) Editorial, by Hooper Warren, *Edwardsville Spectator*, November 27, 1821.

\(^8\) James Hall, *Letters from the West; Containing Sketches of Scenery, Manners, and Customs; and Anecdotes Connected with the First Settlements of the Western Sections of the United States* (1828; reprinted, Gainsville, FL: Scholars' Facsimilies & Reprints, 1867), 142.

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support the candidate who was “distinguished by his moral and intellectual worth” and recommended that their audience avoid selecting as their representatives ambitious designing men who seek office “[t]o gain renown” rather than serve “the public weal.”

In the months preceding his decision to enter the contest, Coles learned just how important the perception of independence and disinterestedness was to the public. Throughout the spring and summer of 1821, Joseph B. Phillips, who had declared his candidacy in February of that year, endured the unrelenting attacks of several editorialists, but one author was particularly aggressive in his assault. “One of the People” authored no less than five separate editorials, each of which was designed to discredit Phillips’s candidacy. He described Phillips as “an artful ambitious man,” who was only concerned with advancing his own interests. He also charged that the would-be governor possessed a dubious character and as proof charged that Phillips had entered into an agreement with several members of the legislature and other prominent men in the state. In this way, “One of the People” implied that Phillips had agreed to exchange political favors with anyone who vowed “to support [him] ... at the next election for governor.” According to this

9“The Hustings,” Edwardsville Spectator, May 29, 1819. See also “For the Spectator,” signed “Plain Dealer,” Edwardsville Spectator, June 5, 1819. “Plain Dealer” similarly called for a reform of the tradition of self-nomination. He complained that candidates frequently traveled throughout the state “making equivocal and contradictory promises and professions, according to the principles of the different electors they met.” As evidence of the disastrous effects of such behavior, he cited the fact that “three-fourths of the electors of this state . . . [were] opposed to slavery.” Yet, he asked, “how have they been represented in Congress, the convention, and in the state legislature?” Editorialists simultaneously declared the right of voters to instruct their representatives as well as replace them when they failed to represent adequately the views of their constituency. “Popular Instruction,” signed “A Private Citizen,” “To the People of Illinois,” signed “A Man,” and “Popular Instruction, No. 2,” signed “A Private Citizen,” Edwardsville Spectator, September 4 and 11, 1819 are fairly representative of this trend. On the exercise of the right to instruct representatives and popular politics generally, see Edmund S. Morgan, Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 209-23.
editorialist, then, rather than an independent representative in the classical republican mode, Phillips was an ambitious, self-interested, “political mendicant,” who was beholden to the interests of a small, but influential, group of state leaders. Consequently, he discouraged his audience from supporting a man who was so “dangerous to the liberties of the state.”

As they chastised and frequently unseated national and state representatives who disregarded “the feelings and interests of the people,” Illinois voters contributed to the decline of deferential political habits. The dynamics of the power relationship between elected officials and voters clearly was changing. Voters suspiciously evaluated the character of their candidates, attempting to distinguish between those men who sought office merely to satisfy their own ambitions and those who intended to serve the public good. Even the language they employed revealed the degree to which voters increasingly exerted control over the political process. By the 1820s, representatives were often identified as the “agents” or “servants” of the voters, who, as their “employer” or “master,” put them in office. Political power, which elites had monopolized with little opposition from the public throughout the territorial period in Illinois, was shifting into the hands of the electorate, a process that would come into full force after 1830 with the rise of the Jacksonian political system.

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10 "For the Spectator, No. I, No. II, and No. IV," signed “One of the People,” Edwardsville Spectator, April 10 and 17, 1821 and July 10, 1822.

The character debate, then, revealed two things about Illinois’s changing political culture. On the one hand, the idea that particular individuals, most often wealthy, connected, experienced men, were better suited for political leadership persisted. One anonymous author, for example, discouraged voters from electing “illiterate self-interested candidates” who were often “destitute of talents and information.” These men, he concluded, were “unfit for the station of a legislator.” On the other hand, the critical evaluation of a candidate’s character demonstrated that voters were increasingly reluctant to accept blindly the leadership of a natural aristocracy. So, while Illinoisans continued to select elites for public offices they were also more likely to be critical of those who sought their support. The Illinois electorate, therefore, desired a candidate who was educated enough to fill the important stations of government, yet also disposed to recognize that he owed his election to the people. They wanted the best of both political worlds.¹²

By combining his claim of disinterestedness with an assertion of independence, Coles attempted to benefit from the political transitions occurring in the Prairie State. Yet, despite his efforts to pre-empt charges of self-interest and misplaced ambition, Coles, like Phillips, endured a series of assaults focusing on his character. In late November 1821, a resident, who called himself “Inquirer,” asked if the notice declaring Coles’s candidacy was “a hoax,” claiming that it had to be because the only Edward Coles he knew “denies, positively, having any pretensions to . . . office.” If the newspaper’s

¹²“For the Spectator,” signed “An Elector, St. Clair County, March 5, 1820,” Edwardsville Spectator, March 14, 1820.
announcement was true and the Edward Coles who lived in Edwardsville sought “the highest office in the gift of the people,” the anonymous writer instructed, then he thought Warren should provide the residents of the southern part of the state, to whom he was “so little known,” with a short history of the candidate’s life.13

Hooper Warren immediately obliged the request and offered a description of Coles that contained many details that would become common components of any biographical representation of the Virginian, but which also included information he hardly intended to be flattering. He revealed, for example, that Coles was a native of Virginia, had served as President James Madison’s private secretary and moved to Illinois after his appointment to the land office. According to Warren, however, Coles acquired the post in the Edwardsville Land Office despite the objections of “one of our members” of Congress, who argued against his selection because he believed “that our own state possessed citizens capable of filling the office.” He also implied that William H. Crawford, Secretary of Treasury, had, “in urging the pretensions of Mr. Coles,” endeavored to “promote his own claims in relation to the Presidency.” In this way, Warren attempted to portray Coles as an outsider who was just one among many individuals whose appointment had transformed him into a political agent for Crawford. From Warren’s perspective, then, Coles was a self-interested, ambitious man who lacked the “support of any individual in the state” and whose “pretensions” to office should be “candidly and dispassionately

13Editorial, signed “Inquirer,” Edwardsville Spectator, November 27, 1821.

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considered” by the voters.¹⁴ Like Phillips, Coles was portrayed as the antithesis of the type of political leader Illinois deserved and required.

In the next issue of the Edwardsville Spectator, a resident of the state challenged Warren’s characterization of Coles, claiming that the editor had published “some extraordinary errors” in his biographical sketch of the candidate. While he offered several alternative details regarding Coles’s life before he immigrated to Illinois, and some of them inaccurate, “JUSTICE” denied “that any personal, or interested motives, views, or circumstances, led to his appointment.” More importantly, this editorialist maintained that Warren was “mistaken in supposing that Mr. Coles . . . had not the pledge of support from any individual.” Instead, he assured his audience that although “He may not have received any pledge of support from either of the old parties, . . . he had received assurances of support from the great mass of the people in this part of the state.” Far from a designing and unpopular candidate, then, “JUSTICE” described Coles as a model public servant who was not burdened by an affiliation with the political factions in the state and who enjoyed the affection of a significant segment of the state’s population.¹⁵

Coles also attempted to counter Warren’s negative representation of him by providing voters with an opportunity to judge his character for themselves. To that end,


¹⁵To Mr. Warren, signed “JUSTICE,” Edwardsville Spectator, December 4, 1821.
he increased his acquaintance with the people of the state by canvassing the public for their support. As Nathaniel Buckmaster, a candidate for sheriff in Madison County, observed, “the candidate . . . is obliged to ride over the whole state or district . . . attending every logrolling, petty [muster?], or barbecue, where he is expected to make what is called a stump speech.” A more cynical observer similarly noted that “the candidate for office saunters through the county, telling pretty stories about himself and other men, or he’s at some grog shop, bartering whiskey, flattery and political slander, for the votes of stupid gulls.”

Recognizing the potential benefits of employing such a tactic, Coles embarked on a tour of the southern portion of the state immediately after he entered the contest. If “Inquirer” and his fellow residents of the state’s southern counties had not known much about Coles before December 1821, they surely learned a great deal more about him after he journeyed “to ‘the lower part of the state.’” He then traveled to the state’s eastern counties, visiting prominent residents in various towns, delivering speeches before the public, and conversing with the region’s inhabitants in local taverns. He concluded his loop around the state, by stopping in Bond County to visit Horatio Newhall, who observed that “electioneering is still going on at a great rate” and informed his brothers that “Coles . . . spent a day with us last week.” As Warren observed, Coles’s effort to travel throughout the state left “no doubt of his being familiarly known, in every quarter,

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before the election.”

Coles also recognized that the public expected him to display his allegiance to the majority of the state’s inhabitants by affecting a plain style. As George Flower observed, if a “man [wanted] to be popular . . . with the country people . . . [he] should be acquainted with everybody, shake hands with everybody, and wear an old coat, with at least one good hole in it.” Coles was perfectly willing to behave accordingly in every way, except presenting himself to be as humble and poor as those whose support he desired. Instead, he continued to don his refined eastern clothes, always wearing a silk caravat and finished coat when he appeared in public. Similarly, rather than adopt a plain speaking style, Coles retained a refined manner and deportment that assured his audience of his formal education and elite status. In this way, he sought to combine the more popular political practices of the frontier with the habits of civility and refined sociability that had been so essential to his political success in Washington City and abroad.

The potential effectiveness of Coles’s strategy became clear well before voters cast their ballots. In early May 1822, an anonymous author recorded a fictional conversation between two farmers engrossed in a debate regarding the merits of Coles’s candidacy. “John” announced to his friend “Humphrey” that “I have promised Mr. Coles that I would do all I can for him.” He informed his neighbor that Coles had visited his home several days earlier, and revealed that he was impressed with Coles because he had seemed so familiar and friendly. “He appeared like some old acquaintance,” reported “John,”

17Editorial, by Hooper Warren, Edwardsville Spectator, November 27, 1821 and February 19, 26 and March 5, 1822; Horatio Newhall to [J&J] Newhall, May 11, 1822, Horatio Newhall Papers, Folder 1, ISHL.
“praised the children, and nursed little Joe, the same as you have done.” At the same time, however, he added that the candidate “was dressed in the finest broadcloth,” which had led him to conclude that “he is a fine man.” Coles’s combination of electioneering and elite deportment was so effective that “John” confessed that he could not understand “how any man who sees him can help voting for him.”

Skeptical of Coles’s sincerity, “Humphrey” advised his friend that he had “frequently heard that those great men, when they want our votes, will pretend to be very good and familiar.” Once they have been assured of a voter’s support, he declared, they “care no more for us than the man in the moon.” “John” insisted that Coles was different than most great men because “he is so disinterested.” He believed that Coles “would not care a groat” whether or not he was elected, but conceded that Coles had claimed to be the “best qualified to serve the people.” Although, like “Humphrey” he distrusted arrogance, “John” reminded his friend that Coles had served as private secretary to Madison, arguing that the president “would not employ even a cook or a waiter who was not a great man.” Additionally, “John” reported that Coles had represented the nation abroad, a position that allowed him to socialize with “all the great men of Europe.” “I think with such qualifications as these,” he concluded, “he ought to be supported.” At least as far as “John” was concerned, Coles’s masterful ability to combine popular political tactics with constant reminders of his elite status and political experience had ensured he

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would support his candidacy.\textsuperscript{20}

The other gubernatorial candidates also utilized electioneering as a campaign tactic and delivered stump speeches before numerous audiences as they traveled throughout the state. Newhall reported, for example, that one week before Coles visited him, "Gen. Moore . . . spent the day at my lodgings," just one of several stops "on an electioneering campaign." Likewise, Phillips visited Edwardsville on several occasions, stopping at William C. Wiggins's tavern to discuss politics with the local inhabitants. He also traveled throughout the eastern portion of the state in an attempt to cultivate support among those who knew him the least. Similarly, Browne confessed that he was "very happy to have found a very large portion of my fellow citizens, in every part of the state, that I have visited," willing to support his candidacy. "It was my intention," he confessed, "to have visited every county in the state, with a view to enlarge my acquaintance, and to explain the principles by which, if I should succeed, I intend to be governed."\textsuperscript{21}

Like Coles, all three of his opponents emphasized both their political experience and place among the region's political elite as they made their way across the state. Browne, for example, constantly reminded voters that he had "long been a resident of the state, . . . served several years in the legislature of the territory, . . . and . . . [was] elected one of the Judges of the Supreme Court, by an almost unanimous vote." Unlike Coles,


however, Browne affected a plain style in public, gaining a reputation for enjoying any opportunity “to mingle with the people.” As for Phillips, few residents could forget that he was the Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court and a close associate of Senator Jesse B. Thomas. Additionally, like Coles he “possessed a fine classic education,” and, as an acquaintance observed, was “a man of very respectable talents and pleasing manners.” All of the candidates, then, possessed considerable political experience and boasted of their influential connections, but only Browne embraced the increasingly common expectation that candidates should display their commitment to the people by appearing and behaving like their less-distinguished neighbors.\footnote{TO THE PEOPLE OF ILLINOIS,” signed “THOMAS C. BROWNE,” \textit{Edwardsville Spectator}, July 27, 1822. On the political style displayed by Browne and Phillips, see Reynolds, \textit{Pioneer History}, 392-93; Reynolds, \textit{My Own Times}, 158; and Brown, \textit{Historical Sketch}, 18.}

For Coles in particular, the decision to display continually his refined manner and habits of civility provoked considerable criticism and led many to question his ability to represent the interests of the state’s humblest inhabitants. When he decided to tour the eastern portion of the state, for example, a number of editorialists immediately found fault with his political style. An anonymous editorialist who called himself “NEPTUNE,” described Coles as a flat, shallow, and uninteresting candidate, who relied on polling rather than his own instincts or common sense to elicit support from the voters. This author acknowledged that Coles understood the political process enough to employ at least one tactic aimed at increasing the likelihood of his success. “The new \textit{flat}-bottomed boat Edward Coles,” reported “NEPTUNE,” “will touch at Vandalia to take an additional supply of whiskey and gingerbread, . . . ammunition . . . necessary . . . to contend with the
barge Joseph Phillips.” Yet, he likewise suggested that such an effort would prove ineffective, because Coles’s campaign could claim only a small crew of supporters, individuals who amounted to little more than “mere loblolly boys.” Furthermore, declared this editorialist, Coles was leading a campaign that had “been hastily built, and of the worst materials.” From the perspective of this writer, then, Coles seemed ill-prepared for the rigors of a campaign tour and unlikely to be very successful.23

Two weeks later, another editorial appeared in the Edwardsville Spectator confirming “NEPTUNE’s” prediction. “High Flyer” claimed that when he confronted a “boisterous” crowd and “clouds [that] seemed to indicate a storm,” Coles attempted to employ every political skill at his disposal to dampen the crowd’s hostility toward him and convert them into supporters. As the editorialist described, “after passing the usual civilities, for which the flat captain seemed . . . to be a great stickler,” Coles had “attempted to use polls, for which he is said to be famously expert,” only to discover, “like many great captains of the age, [that] he was out of his depth.” Refusing to be defeated and “assuming a sovereign contempt for danger, for which he is famed,” declared “High

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23Letter to the Editor, signed “NEPTUNE, 15th Feb. 1822,” Edwardsville Spectator, February 19, 1822. In the next issue of the newspaper, “NEPTUNE, Jr.” predicted that “the steam ship NINIAN EDWARDS” would appear in Edwardsville, making it difficult for either Coles or Phillips “to obtain crews who are disposed to encounter so formidable an enemy.” The desire to see Ninian Edwards become a candidate revealed two things about Illinois’s political culture. First, it confirmed that a leadership gap existed in the state and that, for many residents, the four candidates were failing to inspire confidence. Second, despite the increase in political influence among the electorate, voters continued to long for individuals they could identify easily as leaders. As the only governor from the territorial period, one of the state’s Senators, the most widely recognized man in the state, and the perceived head of one of the region’s factions, Edwards epitomized the type of leader they sought. Therefore, despite evidence that a transition from deferential to participant, and eventually partisan, politics was under way, some residents continued to cling to some old-style political habits, creating a tension between two competing, but co-existing, political cultures. See “For the Spectator,” signed “NEPTUNE Jr.,” Edwardsville Spectator, February 26, 1822. See also James Simeone, “Ninian Edwards’ Republican Dilemma,” Illinois Historical Journal 90 (Winter 1997), 245-64.
Flyer,” Coles had summoned “a voice seven times more terrific than the tornado” before him and demanded that his audience hear him. Unfortunately for Coles, his efforts were in vain; for, as the author reported, “all [had] been lost.”

Throughout both editorials, Coles was portrayed as an ambitious elite whose blind pursuit of office prevented him from identifying with or understanding the interests of the electorate. In their description of the confrontation between candidate and hostile audience, Coles appeared to be a “gallant” leader, like other “great” men in the region, whose “noble” character required him to display “civility” when faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Most importantly, Coles’s determination to apply the political habits he had cultivated in Washington City, they implied, revealed just how out of place he was on the frontier, just how much he misunderstood the emerging political expectations of the voters from whom he sought support. Consequently, these editorialists attempted to convince their audience not to support a candidate whose ambitious pursuit of “high destiny” had led him to ignore the very individuals he hoped would cast their ballots for him.

In early April, Hooper Warren echoed the spirit of criticism displayed by “NEPTUNE” and “High Flyer” when he informed the public that Coles had returned safely “to the bosom of his friends in this town, after performing the arduous and fatiguing rounds of the state.” Aware that many believed he was “personally hostile to” Coles, the editor attempted to pre-empt charges of unfair scrutiny by assuring his readers that Coles

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24 "Distressing Occurrence,” signed “Peter Newsman,” Edwardsville Spectator, March 5, 1822.

25 Ibid.
had always treated him civilly. He mockingly proclaimed that the Virginian had "ever treated us, in our presence, with the most killing politeness, . . . his incessant back-biting," he continued, "have never provoked us to break friendship with him." He then reminded his audience that his only source of information on Coles was "furnished by [the candidate] himself," information often "confined to court-anecdotes, and incidents necessarily connected with them." Warren claimed that these subjects "were his constant theme" and anyone who thought otherwise had only to recall that Coles "would frequently, at Wiggins's [tavern] keep a bar-room audience in profound silence," as they listened to the oft-told tales of his life experiences, stories that Warren assured his audience "would be amply sufficient to fill an octavo volume of 500 pages" even when limited to "the cream of them." Like Coles's earlier critics, Warren attempted to depict Coles as an arrogant, bombastic pretender who was intensely self-absorbed and hardly deserving of the support of the voters. 26

As the rhetoric of the gubernatorial campaign before April 1822 revealed, Coles remained unaware of the extent of suspicion and distrust that the Illinois electorate felt toward individuals who presumed to deserve positions of authority. Throughout the first six months of his candidacy, he continued to emphasize his elite status and political experience as the attributes that made him most qualified for office. As the criticisms of his political style mounted, however, it was difficult for voters not to suspect that he was a designing man promoting his own interests rather than those of the people. As one editor had recommended as early as 1820, rather than restrict their elective choice to

26"HON. EDWARD COLES, ESQ.," by Hooper Warren, Edwardsville Spectator, April 9, 1822.
any "particular class of citizens," Illinoisans should "unite their exertions to secure the
election of those men who are most honest, most capable, and most faithful to the
constitution. . . . No matter whether a man be a farmer, a mechanic, a physician, or a
lawyer," the author continued, "if he possesses the requisite qualifications, let us not
deprive ourselves of his services." Coles's reliance on his habits of civility and previous
political experience hardly distinguished him from his opponents and revealed just how
unaware he was of the extent of the political changes emerging around him.

Fortunately for Coles and possibly as a result of his own efforts, several
editorialists introduced slavery as a campaign issue at precisely the moment public
criticisms of his elite pretensions were becoming so potent. Acknowledging that "It is
pretty well known that a considerable ferment exists in some parts of the state, respecting
the call of a new convention for the purpose of tolerating slavery," one editorialist called
on each candidate "to give his opinion . . . on this all important subject." Another
anonymous writer complained that "some [candidates] are believed to be favourable to
slavery and a new convention; and that any are unfavorable is uncertain." To remedy the
situation, the author recommended that each candidate "do justice to himself," and the
residents of the state, by "speedily and publicly declar[ing] his sentiment" on the issue.28

Prior to these requests, all four candidates pursued public support in similar ways.

27"For the Spectator," signed "AN ELECTOR, St. Clair County, March 5, 1820," Edwardsville
Spectator, March 14, 1820.

28"FOR THE SPECTATOR. To the various candidates who offer their services to the people of
Illinois, to fill the office of Governor," signed "THE PEOPLE OF ILLINOIS," "FOR THE SPECTATOR.
To the Candidates for the next Legislature," signed "A majority of the People," Edwardsville Spectator,
April 2 and 13, 1822.
Each man toured the state, delivered speeches and met with local inhabitants.

Additionally, all four men boasted of their elite status and broad political experience, characteristics that defined them as members of the region’s natural aristocracy. Consequently, voters possessed little, if any, way to distinguish one candidate from another and were left to rely on their personal knowledge or impression of the men as they contemplated whom to support. By the spring of 1822, however, the tone of the gubernatorial election changed dramatically and, more than anything, the slavery issue dominated the public discourse. John Reynolds observed, for example, that “the slavery question entered largely into the canvass, and governed the vote in many counties.” Similarly, Horatio Newhall testified that “in the Choice of State & National officers the contest will be between those in favour of slavery, and those opposed to it.”29 To Coles’s delight and anticipated advantage, then, the debate over which candidate deserved the support of the people focused less on political style and more on the slavery issue throughout the final months of the contest.

While he was widely recognized as an antislavery candidate because of his decision to emancipate his inherited bound laborers, all of Coles’s opponents owned enslaved laborers, causing many voters to assume they supported a convention and slavery. Joseph B. Phillips, who resided in St. Clair County, owned several bound laborers in Tennessee, and, in July 1821 his defenders encouraged everyone “favorable to slavery to rally round” him because he was “a man through whom their objects can be accomplished.” Thomas C. Brown, a Shawneetown lawyer who also owned three hundred and twenty acres in the Saline District of Gallatin County, owned at least three slaves. Although he consistently ignored the slavery issue, refusing to comment on his position publicly, most residents believed Browne was a proslavery candidate and would “receive a large vote” from the eastern portion of the state where support for the institution was strongest. Moore was the only other potentially antislavery candidate. He lived in Monroe County where he employed four enslaved laborers on his one hundred and sixty acre farm and mill tract.\textsuperscript{30}

As the election approached and more and more residents became interested to know each

\textsuperscript{30}For Coles’s first public declaration of his opposition to slavery, see his Fourth of July toast, in the Edwardsville Spectator, July 10, 1819. As noted in the previous chapter, he celebrated the nation’s independence by declaring “The rights of man - They appertain equally to him, whether his complexion be white, red, or black.” On Phillips, see “From the Intelligencer, No. 2,” signed “Another One of the People,” Edwardsville Spectator, July 10, 1821 (original in the Illinois Intelligencer, July 3, 1821). Phillips never denied that he held proslavery views. In December 1821, he did, however, confide to Thomas Sloo, Jr., a future representative from Jefferson County, that he thought the slavery issue was irrelevant. See Joseph B. Phillips to Thomas Sloo, Jr., December 31, 1821, in Isaac J. Cox, ed., “Selections from the Torrence Papers,” Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, Quarterly 6 (1911), 52. For Browne, see Norton, ed., Illinois Census, 81 and Thomas Browne, Town lot, Gallatin County, March 8, 1815 and 320 acres, Saline, February 1, 1817, March 16, 1818, and August 31, 1818, Illinois Public Domain Land Tract Sales, Illinois State Archives. For Moore’s slave ownership, see Margaret Cross Norton, ed., Illinois Census Returns 1820 (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1934), 201. For his landownership, see James B. Moore, 160 acres, Monroe County, December 3, 1814, Illinois Public Domain Land Tract Sales, Illinois State Archives. Moore has been identified as an antislavery candidate by most historians of early Illinois. See Pease, The Frontier State, 74; Buley, The Old Northwest, II: 21-1; and Boggess, The Settlement of Illinois, 181-82.
candidate's position "in relation to the call of a convention," most voters concluded that they faced a choice between four men, one openly antislavery candidate, two apparent proslavery political aspirants, and one individual who refused to confirm or deny where he stood on the issue.31

Despite Coles's well-known antislavery credentials, the increasing visibility of the slavery issue hardly seemed to work to his advantage initially. Instead, like his refined manner and deportment, the emergence of the slavery issue provided Coles's critics with a new way to attack his candidacy. Hooper Warren, whose animosity toward Coles had become well-known throughout the state, warned voters that the public discussion of slavery "should not operate in favor of the pretensions of a candidate who may have emancipated half a dozen FREE negroes, with the sole view of thereby obtaining the votes of the Methodists and Yankees." Not only did he cast doubt on the sincerity of Coles's antislavery commitment, but the editor also challenged Coles's character as a leader when he informed his audience that no candidate "whose weight of character and influence are best calculated to defeat the [slavery] measure" was among the individuals vying for public support. Similarly, another anonymous author declared that Coles "had emancipated six or eight old and worthless negroes, and yet holds in bondage, in a neighboring state many young and valuable ones." From the perspective of both these critics, Coles's antislavery views were dubious at best. Worse still, he had unleashed on Illinois society the very type of resident most white inhabitants despised, free people of

31Editorial, Edwardsville Spectator, May 4, 1822.
Rather than idly stand by as his political enemies attempted to denigrate his character, deny the legitimacy of his claim to leadership and manipulate the anti-black prejudices of the region’s residents to his disadvantage, Coles orchestrated a response to the charges marshaled against him. In early June, Coles composed an open letter to the public explaining his decision to emancipate his enslaved laborers. Published in the *Illinois Intelligencer* and reprinted in the *Edwardsville Spectator*, Coles confirmed that, “[i]n accordance with my principles and feelings, which have, from an early period of my life, been very strongly opposed to slavery, I emancipated . . . all the slaves bequeathed to me.” Although he acknowledged that several of the bound laborers he inherited remained under his care and lived in St. Louis, Coles declared that the circumstances were more complicated than they appeared. Among the chattels he inherited, he noted, “there was a woman who was the mother of five children, . . . and knowing that it would be impossible for her to support herself when freed, . . . I felt it my duty to assist her.” To that end, he purchased her husband, who belonged to a neighboring planter, and provided for his freedom once he paid back the cost of his purchase. He also revealed that he had “executed her free papers to take effect when her husband should become free,” which was to occur in August 1825. “[I]n the meantime,” Coles disclosed, “the support of her and her family devolved onto me.” Of the ten enslaved laborers who had received their freedom in 1819, he continued, he had also “gave a quarter section of land each as a 

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remuneration for their past services.” Therefore, “far from holding in bondage many young and valuable negroes,” he proclaimed, “I own none, but have liberated all, in the manner described.”

In this letter Coles attempted to negotiate carefully the narrow space between slavery and freedom that existed for most blacks in Antebellum America. He counted those who remained in bondage as “free” because the mechanisms for their emancipation were already in place. He anticipated that such an arrangement would have been comforting to his readers. In a society that had promulgated laws prohibiting the settlement of free blacks amongst them as early as 1812, he hoped the residents of Illinois would cheer his efforts to avoid releasing into their midst blacks who were unable to support themselves. Yet, at the same time, by emancipating the other enslaved laborers he possessed and providing them with land, Coles unwittingly provided the very voters he courted with a reason to dislike him. Since many of them lacked the ability to purchase their own land and suffered financially from the severe depression sparked by the Panic of 1819, most Illinoisans resented any competition from free black landowners. More importantly, poor whites often felt that successful free blacks threatened their independence and status among their white peers. As James Hall observed, “The blacks entertain a high respect for those whom they term ‘gentlemen,’ . . . but ‘poor white folks’ they cordially despise.” Far from inspiring support for his candidacy, then, his explanation of why he emancipated his inherited property and settled them in Illinois became a

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legitimate reason for many prejudiced residents to oppose his election.34

Still, through this public letter, Coles intended to portray himself as a principled man, who was rational, responsible, virtuous, and, most importantly, paternalistic. Far from being moved by unthinking passion or ambition, Coles freed his chattel property as a result of a “conviction of the impropriety of holding them.” He accomplished his goal by executing a well-reasoned plan that acknowledged the utility and necessity of gradualism. Additionally, he maintained a paternalistic interest in his ex-slaves by supporting those who failed to do so themselves and by providing the others with a secure future through land ownership. For those voters seeking to elect a responsible man who was willing to sacrifice his own private interest for the common good, Coles believed he posed a promising alternative to the other candidates. Unfortunately for him, Coles’s representation of himself as a benevolent, paternalistic elite clashed with the anti-black prejudices and egalitarianism, increasingly expressed as anti-elitism, exhibited by the state’s residents.35

A month later, he continued his effort to legitimize his antislavery actions by submitting for publication in the Illinois Intelligencer a copy of Thomas Jefferson’s response to his letter of July 1814 requesting that the Sage of Monticello come out of retirement to lead the fight against slavery in Virginia. In the publication Jefferson expressed his regret that the revolutionary generation, “nursed and educated in the daily

34“From the Illinois Intelligencer,” Edwardsville Spectator, July 6, 1822; Hall, Letters from the West, 142.

35“From the Illinois Intelligencer,” Edwardsville Spectator, July 6, 1822.
habit of seeing degradation,” had been unable to carry their actions “the whole length of
the principles they had invoked for themselves,” but concluded that the task of following
through with these principles had been left to “the younger generation,” whose knowledge
and understanding of liberty he hoped would cause them to sympathize “with oppression
wherever found.” Perhaps most importantly, however, the letter clearly legitimized
Coles’s actions by demonstrating that Jefferson had provided him with a blue-print to
follow. By liberating his chattel property, he, however, had only accomplished one part of
the program. He implied, then, that if Illinoisans failed to elect him they would be going
against the wish of Jefferson, for the third president had implored Coles to “come forward
in public councils, become a Missionary of this doctrine . . . & press the proposition
perseveringly until it is accomplished.” By pursuing the governorship in Illinois, Coles
was fulfilling the request of an honored mentor and he hoped that after reading this letter,
the inhabitants of the Prairie State would be convinced that his leadership would expedite
the arrival of that “hour of emancipation,” which Jefferson claimed was “advancing in the
march of time.”

On August 5, 1822, after a long and intense campaign, the residents of Illinois
finally descended upon their courthouses to cast ballots for a new governor. When the
votes were finally tallied, Edward Coles, to everyone’s surprise including his own, was
declared the winner, defeating Joseph B. Phillips and Thomas C. Browne by the slimmest

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36 For the Intelligencer, Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, August 25, 1814, "Illinois
Intelligencer, July 2, 1822. The letter was reprinted in the Edwardville Spectator, see “Replication by
Warren,” Free West, May 10, 1855, in Alvord, ed., Governor Edward Coles, 346. For the original
exchange, see Edward Coles to Thomas Jefferson, July 31, 1814; Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles,
August 25, 1814; Edward Coles to Thomas Jefferson, September 26, 1814, The Papers of Edward Coles,
1786-1868, PU.
of margins [See TABLE 1]. Coles garnered 2,854, or thirty-three percent of the popular vote. Phillips received 2,687, or thirty-one percent, and Browne won 2,443, or twenty-eight percent, while Moore gained only 622, or seven percent, of the votes cast. Although the margins dividing the candidates were statistically insignificant, Coles's victory, when examined at the county level, revealed that his thirty-three percent was probably stronger than it appeared. He won over eighty percent of the vote, for example, in five counties, while Browne could claim the same honor in only one county and Phillips could not in any. Additionally, he claimed over fifty percent of the vote in eight counties. In the nine counties he won, then, Coles boasted a stronger showing than either Phillips or Browne could claim in the same situation.37

Geographically, the election returns revealed a variety of patterns [See FIGURE 3]. Most obviously, each candidate won the counties in the vicinity of their residence. Coles claimed eighty-one percent of the vote in his native Madison County and won the entire northwest portion of the state. Thomas C. Browne, who lived in Shawneetown, earned seventy-seven percent of the vote in Gallatin County and controlled the southeastern section of the state. Joseph B. Phillips, a resident of St. Clair County, was the only candidate who failed to win over fifty-percent of the vote in his home county, but, nevertheless, dominated the southwestern side of Illinois. The candidates, then, seemed to emerge victorious where their personalities and reputations were most familiar to the

TABLE 1
GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION, 1822

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTY</th>
<th>COLES votes / percent</th>
<th>PHILIPS votes / percent</th>
<th>BROWNE votes / percent</th>
<th>MOORE votes / percent</th>
<th>TOTAL VOTES</th>
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<td>79 / 28</td>
<td>37 / 13</td>
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FIGURE 3

Gubernatorial Election, 1822

Illinois 1821

Coles (33%)
Phillips (31%)
Browne (28%)
Moore (7%)
Interestingly, the same pattern also reflected a common tie between the candidates and the socioeconomic character of the regions in which they won. Coles, for example, was the newest arrival among the candidates, owned the most unimproved land, and relied on hired laborers, both white and black, to cultivate his farm. The entire northwest portion of the state contained relatively new immigrants, the most available land, and a large number of residents who relied on a labor force other than slaves to maintain their farms. Conversely, Thomas C. Browne settled in Illinois prior to the War of 1812, was considered a member of the territorial elite, and relied, at least partially, on the labor of enslaved blacks. The southeastern portion of the state, particularly Shawneetown where Browne practiced law, was one of the oldest districts in the state and generated most of its wealth from a saline works that depended heavily upon enslaved labor. Voters, then, may have cast their vote for men who were not only familiar to them, but who reflected the life-style most similar to their own.

When considered from the perspective of the slavery issue, the election results demonstrated yet another significant pattern. Those counties farthest from the borders with the slave states and least dependent on enslaved labor supported Coles, the only openly antislavery candidate. While he carried the northern counties with sixty-nine percent of the vote, Coles failed to win a majority in any of the southern counties.

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Alternatively, either Phillips or Browne won majorities in every southern county except Monroe, where Moore resided. Those counties closest to the slave states and with the largest black population, enslaved and free combined, voted for either of the two recognized proslavery candidates.

Significantly, although the election results seemed to imply that they favored slavery, many inhabitants in the southern part of the state may have voted against Coles, not because they favored the extension of slavery, but because they feared the consequences of his antislavery position. Rather than risk supporting a candidate who seemed to embrace social and economic equality for all men, black and white, they preferred to support a candidate, who like them, believed that blacks were inferior and that their status should be sustained by a social order that placed all whites, regardless of wealth and social standing, above their black neighbors. Similarly, those voters in the north who supported Coles may have cared little about his antislavery credentials. Instead, they may have cast their votes for him because they thought it was the safest way to ensure that the black population in their midst remained small. The sectional division apparent in the election returns, then, was more complex than merely a contrast between pro- and antislavery regions. Instead, the north-south distinction also exposed the complicated relationship between the various positions on the slavery issue and anti-black prejudice that shaped Illinois society during the early nineteenth century.

Given the closeness of the vote totals, any explanation of Coles’s victory and Browne and Phillip’s defeat based solely on the election returns remains difficult. If the returns are considered in light of the increasing importance of the slavery issue during the
last months of the campaign, however, a number of possible explanations emerge.

Although many residents had predicted that Phillips would win the election early on, a variety of circumstances probably contributed to his defeat. Phillips presented himself as a trusted member of the territorial elite by emphasizing his political experience and connections to the influential men of the state. Additionally, he was a confirmed proslavery candidate. Those voters who either desired to see slavery legalized in Illinois or simply supported a proslavery candidate because they despised free and enslaved blacks had two candidates, for Browne was similarly perceived to be in favor of slavery, to choose from. Significantly as well, he announced his candidacy over a year and a half before the election. Consequently, editorialists had ample opportunity to discredit his candidacy, and they did so vigorously by criticizing his elite pretensions and position on the slavery issue. Together, the length of time he was subject to scrutiny, his elite status, and his inability to consolidate the proslavery vote behind his candidacy prevented him from winning the election. In fact, although he garnered the second highest vote total in the election, he was probably the third strongest candidate. For Thomas C. Browne claimed over fifty percent of the popular vote in twice as many counties as Phillips.

Thomas C. Browne, then, was probably the strongest candidate in the race. Like both Coles and Phillips, he displayed many of the qualities of the traditional ruling elite. He could boast of his wealth, in both land and slaves, extensive political experience, as well as significant ties to one of the region’s political factions. Unlike the other two candidates, however, Browne refused to express “an interest in the slavery question” and he entered the contest very late. Consequently, he was subject to scrutiny for a far shorter
period of time and was able to avoid the criticisms launched so effectively against both of his primary opponents. Browne, then, most likely received the support of both pro- and antislavery voters, men who wished to limit, if not prevent, any increase in Illinois’s black population and men who opposed the legalization of the slave system. More than anything, his failure to win the election probably resulted from the loss of some of the proslavery votes to Phillips.39

Coles, although the victor, shared many of the same liabilities of his opponents. He too claimed elite status. Indeed, he may have been more boastful of his gentry heritage and ties to the most influential political leaders in the nation than any of his fellow candidates. Like Phillips, he also entered the race relatively early, a full ten months before the election took place. And, like his opponent from St. Clair County, he endured the relentless attacks of those who viewed his pretentious and stiff demeanor with disdain. Unlike both of his main competitors, however, Coles proudly broadcast his antislavery views and attempted to use his decision to liberate his enslaved property to curry favor with the voters. Although his strategy only encouraged a minority of Illinoisans to support his bid for the governorship, the nearly equal distribution of proslavery and anti-black voters between Browne and Phillips secured Coles’s victory.

39Brown, Historical Sketch, 18; Thomas Ford, A History of Illinois, From Its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 30-31; John Thomas Cassidy, “The Issue of Freedom in Illinois Under Governor Edward Coles,” Illinois State Historical Society Journal 57 (1964), 386; Eudora Richardson, “The Virginian Who Made Illinois a Free State,” Illinois State Historical Society Journal 45 (1952), 13; Alvord, ed., Governor Edward Coles, 52; and Washburne, Sketch of Edward Coles, 589. For an opposing view, see Leichtle, “Edward Coles,” 139-41. Leichtle argues that “the only tenable conclusion that can be drawn is that a series of issues and personalities decided the election. Probably more important than slavery was banking, with internal improvements as a strong minor theme” (141).
Almost immediately, Hooper Warren proclaimed his dissatisfaction with the outcome of the election. In the August 31 issue of the *Edwardsville Spectator*, the editor declared that “we do believe that the circumstances of his election is degrading to the character of the state. The President can no longer hesitate, when he may wish to get rid of a useless lackey,” he continued, “to appoint him to a fat office in Illinois.” Distrustful of Coles because his political loyalties lay outside the state and resentful of his elite pretensions, Warren refused to curtail his criticisms of the governor-elect. All to familiar with the impact partisan conflicts and intense opposition could have on an administration after his tenure in Washington City, Coles undoubtedly recognized that his term as the executive of the state would be anything but smooth and enjoyable.⁴⁰

As Warren’s comments revealed, Coles’s attempt to generate a broad base of support for his candidacy by employing the various political tactics at his disposal was not very successful. His unyielding determination to identify himself as a member of the region’s natural aristocracy by displaying a refined manner, by relying on his habits of civility, only provided his critics with the material necessary to portray him as an ambitious elite who hardly understood the interests of the state’s poor farming majority. Similarly, his antislavery commitment, rather than rallying behind him those who resented the Southern social order and the inequality it generated, only divided the electorate by alienating those whose anti-black prejudice outweighed their opposition to slavery. Ultimately, then, the very characteristics of his personality and life-experiences that Coles perceived to be great political assets turned out to be liabilities in Illinois, where the

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combination of growing distrust of elite leadership and anti-black prejudice undermined his claim to authority.

As had become clear during the earlier congressional elections and most recent gubernatorial contest, voters, at the behest of mostly elite editorialists, increasingly viewed a candidate's elite status, his membership among the "great men" of the state, as a liability. Consequently, candidates were forced to court voters' support by affecting a more common style and identity if they wanted to retain their political authority. As John Snyder recalled, despite his wealth, political experience, and position as the leader of one of the region's political factions, Jesse B. Thomas's popularity was based on his ability to present himself as "one of the people." He accomplished this by always appearing "plain in dress, on language and manners," and behaving in an "exceedingly social and affable" manner. Similarly, although he received a classical education, was one of Ninian Edwards's political lieutenants, and served as Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court, as well as a member of the state legislature, John Reynolds "learned all the bye-words, old sayings and figures of speech invented by vulgar ingenuity and common among a backwoods people" to enable him to more accurately affect the common persona essential to any candidate's political success.41

Yet, Edward Coles continued to display a commitment to a traditional republican political style that was completely at odds with the political changes surrounding him. Not only had he boasted of his elite status and national political experience during his election

campaign, but he had refused to adopt a plain political style when meeting with the residents of the state. Coles's commitment to a traditional understanding of republican leadership continued during the first months of his tenure in office. Within a few weeks of assuming his post, for example, Coles noticed that in a recent issue of the Illinois Intelligencer the editors had referred to him as "His Excellency." He immediately composed a note, that was eventually published in the paper, declaring that such a title was too "aristocratical and high sounding" to apply to any individual filling a representative position. "It is in practice disagreeable to my feelings and inconsistent," he continued, "with the dignified simplicity of freemen. . . . And having made it a rule through life to address no one as His Excellency, or the Honorable," he requested that the editors, as well as "my fellow Citizens generally," avoid applying such appellations "to me." By adopting this republican posture, Coles exposed the extent of his commitment to an old-fashioned political style that was rapidly fading out of practice.  

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On the afternoon of December 5, 1822, newly-elected Governor Edward Coles entered the small "wooden building . . . two stories high - not very high though," that housed Illinois's General Assembly. Inside members from both houses of the state legislature, the Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, and various clerks and secretaries from both chambers lined the walls and crowded onto the "long hard benches" that served as "seats for the members." Aware that few in the audience had predicted his victory and

that many remained skeptical of his political skills, Coles assumed a position “on a
platform . . . a few inches high” and delivered his first speech as an elected official.43

As most of his audience anticipated, the new executive asked members to focus
their attention on a variety of issues. Indeed, Coles used his inaugural address to outline
his vision for the state, a program that he promised would “maintain the rights of
individuals, and the common good of the community.” To that end, he proposed to
promote education, trade and internal improvements, and encourage the development of
local manufacturing, all improvements Coles assured his audience would advance the
interests of both the state and the nation. He concluded his remarks by assuring those
present that any differences of opinion that may emerge during his tenure as governor
would be “an honest difference” and vowed to do all he could to promote “harmony and
kind feelings between the several coordinate branches of the government, and between the
individual members composing them.”44

Such a vow, however, proved difficult to maintain, for to everyone’s surprise,
Coles also used his inaugural address to bring the issue of slavery squarely before the
legislature. He declared that it was “the intention of the framers” of the Northwest
Ordinance of 1787 “that slavery and involuntary servitude should cease” in the region
north of the Ohio River, but complained that “slavery still exists in the State.” In order to

43For the description of the state house in Vandalia, see Mary Burtschi, Vandalia: Wilderness
Capital of Lincoln’s Land (Vandalia: The Little Brick House, 1963) and William E. Baringer, Lincoln’s

44“Fellow Citizens of the Senate and of the House of Representatives,” December 5, 1822, by
Edward Coles, Edwardsville Spectator, December 14, 1822; Commonplace Book, Volume VIII, Edward
Coles Collection, HSP.
honor those intentions as well as "our principles," Coles instructed the legislature to make "just and equitable provisions . . . for the abrogation of slavery in the state." Coles's speech immediately split the legislature into two factions, one in favor of and the other opposed to slavery. Both chambers appointed select committees to investigate the Governor's recommendations. Within several weeks, each committee issued a report. Although they disagreed over whether or not the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 had abolished slavery, the committee members agreed that the only way to address the slavery issue was through a new constitutional convention.45

The divisions apparent in the reports only reflected the conflicts and hostilities that had shaped Illinois society over the previous four years. The presence of four candidates who each possessed liabilities equally damaging to their candidacies resulted in a gubernatorial contest in which the outcome was nearly equally divided between the three strongest candidates. Unable to cultivate the support of a majority of the state's residents, Coles assumed the governorship well-aware that he lacked the mandate to perform the reforms he desired. Still, armed with the pedometer (an instrument that measured the distance an individual walked) James Madison gave him to celebrate his victory, Coles attempted "to walk in a straight path with measured steps" as he tried to transform Illinois into a prosperous free society of independent and enterprising farmers.46


46James Madison to Edward Coles, October 19, 1822, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.
CHAPTER 5

“Party spirit raged with all the violence of a storm”: Slavery and the Rise of Democratic Political Habits in Illinois

On the cold blustery evening of February 13, 1823, Edward Coles sat before a cozy fire in the Governor’s residence in Vandalia, Illinois astonished by the recent turn of events. The day before, two-thirds of the state House of Representatives successfully passed a resolution calling for a convention to revise the state’s constitution, the first step in a scheme to legalize slavery. As he sat pondering the consequences of the vote, the sound of “shouts and yells ... intermingled with loud blasts” disturbed his pensive mood. Peeking through his window, Coles spied Justice Joseph B. Phillips, Senator Theophilus W. Smith, and Senator William Kinney, “followed by the majority of the legislature and the hangers-on and rabble about the seat of government,” assembled along the steps of the state house celebrating their victory. Armed with torches to light their way, the crowd formed “a noisy, disorderly and tumultuous procession” and marched through Vandalia’s muddy streets “blowing ... tin horns and ... beating drums and tin pans,” reportedly shouting “Convention or death!” Drunk with the arrogance of triumph and undoubtedly a healthy dose of whiskey, the crowd sought to “intimidate and crush all opposition” to a constitutional convention. Despite this show of bravado, however, the contest had really
During the days immediately following the passage of the convention resolution, the members of the state legislature gathered together to support or oppose a convention. One “very large and respectable meeting of citizens” met in the legislative hall on February 15 to profess their “approbation” for a convention. They nominated a committee of seven men and instructed them to report “the sense of the meeting.” Colonel Thomas Cox, a resident of Sangamon County and an ardent lobbyist on behalf of the convention resolution, invoked the preamble of the Declaration of Independence when he declared that those who supported the convention believed “the people are the only legitimate source of all political power, and that it is not only their right, but their duty, to amend, alter, or change their form of government” whenever they determined that it no longer served their best interests. Anyone who denied this “great and fundamental principle” of republican government, he charged, betrayed their own desire to sustain “the corrupt private interest of a few” over the “will of the majority.”


2"TO THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS," signed Thomas Cox, Chairman, Illinois Intelligencer, March 8, 1823. This address was initially reported in the Edwardsville Spectator, March 1, 1823 and reprinted in the Illinois Gazette, March 29, 1823. The other members of the committee
Three days later, the legislators who voted against the convention resolution along with a number of other residents met at a local boarding house where they signed an address explaining their opposition to the convention. Possibly authored by Governor Edward Coles, the minority address acknowledged the “right of the people to alter, amend, and abolish . . . their constitution of government,” but denied that constitutional reform was “the supreme object proposed to be accomplished by a convention.” Instead, they maintained “that a portion of your rulers have formed the systematic design, to expunge from your constitution its fairest features, and entail upon yourselves and your posterity the evils of slavery.” They then implored the residents of the state not to be “deceived . . . [by] the song of the syren,” which proclaimed that the council of revision, organization of the judiciary and the location of the seat of government required alteration, and declared that a vote for the convention was really a vote to legalize slavery.  

Assigned to draft this address included General Guy W. Smith, John M’Lean, Theophilus W. Smith, Emanuel J. West, Thomas Reynolds, William Kinney, Alexander Pope Field, and Joseph A. Beard. On the central role that the idea of “the people” and the representation of their opponents as elites played in the pro-convention strategy, see James Simeone, Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois, the Bottomland Republic (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), 97-132.

Both the pro- and anti-conventionists shared a common desire to promote the economic and social development of Illinois. From the perspective of the pro-conventionists, the constitution required revision, alterations that would eliminate aristocratical features they claimed violated the spirit of the nation’s founding principles. Only by convening a convention could the state’s leadership establish the social and political conditions necessary for the promotion of the interests of a free and independent people. Their opponents, on the other hand, argued that the constitution was fine in its current form, and charged that the real object of the campaign for a convention was to legalize slavery, an institution, they declared to be inherently incompatible with a free republican society. In the end, the convention contest became a competition between two similar but incompatible visions of Illinois society. Both groups envisioned a prosperous Illinois populated by a free and independent people, but they disagreed over whether or not the legalization of slavery would facilitate or hinder the region’s economic and social development.

More than any other individual, Edward Coles emerged as the most recognized leader of the anti-convention cause, if for no other reason than his singular responsibility for precipitating the convention crisis. “[B]elieving that my present office increases the obligation I am under as a good citizen to exert myself to enlighten the minds of my

Vandalia, March 7, 1823,” Illinois Intelligencer, March 15, 1823. Lippincott however, reported that Coles “was not present” at the meeting. See “From the Illinois Republican,” signed “Thos. Lippincott, Edwardsville, June 12, 1823,” Illinois Intelligencer, June 28, 1823. Unfortunately, no original survives in Coles’s records. He did retain a clipping of the address in one of his commonplace books. Curiously, in every clipping where a pseudonym was used or the authorship was incorrectly attributed to someone else, Coles wrote in the margin or below the pen-name “by E. Coles.” No such notation exists on the clipping of this initial address. See Commonplace Book, 1817-1830, Volume VIII, 20-23, Edward Coles Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP).
Fellow-Citizens," Coles revealed, "I conceive myself bound, both as a Citizen and an Officer, to do all in my power" to oppose the convention and slavery. To that end, Coles provided economic, organizational, and substantive support to the anti-convention forces. Having been subjected to the withering criticism of several newspaper editors during his gubernatorial campaign, Coles understood the power of the printed word and purchased a controlling interest in the *Illinois Intelligencer* and installed an anti-convention editor at its helm. He collected, copied, and orchestrated the distribution of antislavery pamphlets and essays. Additionally, Coles composed no less than thirteen essays, published under the pseudonym "One of Many" and entitled "The Voice of Virtue, Wisdom, and Experience," during the most crucial months of the contest. Even though he carefully attempted to conceal his activities, Coles's well-known antislavery views and responsibility for initiating the contest made him a natural target for the opposition. Indeed, as he confessed to James Madison, who had also attempted to captain the ship of state through rough weather, "Whatever may be the result of this question, it will certainly have the effect of giving me a very stormy time of it as long as I shall remain at the helm."

From Coles's perspective, the events of his first winter as governor were very discouraging. While he anticipated that the public discussion of the slavery issue would provoke a great deal of excitement, and possibly thrust the state into turmoil, he never imagined the extent of hostility his call for the abolition of slavery would generate. As John Reynolds reported to his uncle in Tennessee, "Our country is in a great ferment on

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\*Edward Coles to Roberts Vaux, June 27, 1823, Vaux Family Papers, HSP; Edward Coles to James Madison, April 25, 1823, The Edward Coles Papers, Chicago Historical Society (hereafter CHS).\*
the Convention.” Years later, he recalled that “Men, women, and children entered the arena of party-warfare and strife, and the families and neighborhoods were so divided and furious and bitter against one another, that it seemed a regular civil war.” Similarly, William H. Brown declared that the convention question provoked so much tension and animosity that “old friendships were sundered, families divided, and neighborhoods arraigned in opposition to each other.” Indeed, as Coles informed his family in Virginia, the convention crisis brought out the worst in the politicians of the state. “[P]arty spirit raged with all the violence of a storm,” reported Coles, “and against no object was its merciless peltings more severe than against the Executive.”

Certainly, as he surveyed the publications in the newspaper and listened to the conversations of local residents, Coles came to doubt that his ambition to rid Illinois of slavery and transform it into a harmonious community of free and independent republicans would be successful.

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At the conclusion of the first legislative session of his governorship in February 1823, Edward Coles returned to Edwardsville to attend to his farm and help organize the anti-convention forces in the western part of the state. His journey was slow and labored. The road from Vandalia, although one of the more developed in the region, was marred by a thick, deep mud produced by the spring rains, forcing him to alternate between riding and walking his horse. Yet, the lengthy trip was certainly worthwhile, for immediately
upon his arrival, a group of citizens cheered his return and announced their determination to celebrate his firm stand against slavery. “As soon as I arrived in this place,” he informed his niece, “a deputation on behalf of the Citizens of this town and County invited” him to participate in a public dinner. Held on March 5, 1823, many of the region’s most prominent inhabitants gathered at Roland P. Allen’s house to honor their Governor. At the conclusion of the meal, Henry Starr, who was selected by the attendants to preside over the event, toasted “The occasion” by declaring that “Freemen delight in giving applause to faithful public servants.” For the third toast, he proclaimed “Liberty. While we enjoy the blessings, may we not be willing to withhold it from others.” Once the scripted toasts were completed, Coles stood to thank the audience for their show of support and offered a toast of his own: “The crisis: it is big with the fate of Illinois, and requires every friend of freedom to rally under the banners of the constitution.” After Coles retired for the evening, William Otwell concluded the celebration by praising the Governor’s leadership by announcing that “By his firmness in the hour of trial, and his adherence to the cause of freedom, he has proven himself worthy of the confidence of a free people.”

Determined not to be outdone, the pro-conventionists held a public dinner on the same afternoon at Major William H. Hopkins’s house. The attendants cheered John Todd, the acting president of the gathering, as he toasted “The people, the only legitimate source

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“Edward Coles to Eliza Carter, March 15, 1823, Carter-Smith Family Papers, UVA; “MARK OF RESPECT,” Edwardsville Spectator, March 8, 1823. A few days later, when Coles was traveling through Belleville in St. Clair County, the residents similarly requested his presence at a public dinner to honor him. Such “a large party dined with me,” he reported, “that the room could not contain them all.” See Edward Coles to Eliza Carter, March 15, 1823, Carter-Smith Family Papers, UVA.

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of political power,” and proclaimed that “The convention [was] demanded by the voice of
the people.” Accompanied by The Peoples March, he also championed the pro-
conventionists’s allegiance to “The spirit of our forefathers. May we, like them, resist
aristocracy when assumed under the garb of republicanism.” After the formal toasts
concluded, William Kinney mocked Coles by altering the Governor’s toast to reflect the
pro-conventionist’s perspective. To the applause of those before him, Kinney toasted
“The crisis: it is big with the fate of Illinois, and requires every friend of freedom to rally
around its constitution and amend it so as to promote” the interests of the people. M. G.
W. Kerr delivered the final toast of the evening, declaring that “The majority on the
convention bill who labored so zealously for the people’s rights, deserve their warmest
approbation.”

Neither Coles nor Hooper Warren, the editor of the antislavery Edwardsville
Spectator, could believe the rhetoric employed by those who favored the convention.
Coles was surprised that the pro-conventionists “were very anxious to impress it upon us .
.. that we had made ourselves very obnoxious to the people by opposing” the convention
resolution. Similarly, Warren asked in an editorial published just after the public dinners,
“Whence is all this noise about THE PEOPLE, and the PEOPLE’S rights?” From his
perspective, “THE PEOPLE” had already declared “that the further introduction of
slavery should not be permitted” and warned his audience that the pro-conventionists
would attempt to overshadow the slavery issue by “set[ting] up the hue and cry of ‘The
People’s Rights’ – ‘The People’s Power’ – ‘The People’s Privileges.’” Remember, he

“Public Dinner,” Edwardsville Spectator, March 8, 1823.

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warned the voters of Illinois, "it is the province of the sycophant, first to flatter, then betray. He alone is the friend of THE PEOPLE," he concluded, "who will not deceive them." Coles and Warren both hoped that most residents would see through the propaganda offered by the opposition and recognize that "the principle object of the leading men who were in favor of it was to . . . make this a slaveholding State."*

Anti-conventionists countered the pro-conventionist democratic rhetoric by emphasizing their own allegiance to republicanism through a language of freedom and consistently declared that the legalization of slavery was the real purpose of the convention. At a Fourth of July celebration in Sangamon County, for example, the toast to "The Tree of Liberty, planted by the ordinance of 1787, nourished by Ohio and Indiana - may Illinois never cut it down" was greeted with eleven cheers. Similarly, in Pike County the audience received a toast to "A Convention - The mother of slavery, advocated by a designing party - may the voice of freedom at the approaching election, convince them that virtue still lives" with six cheers and the song *The Galley Slave.*

Lieutenant John Wood, who served as marshal for the day, proclaimed the hope that "The happy soil of America, consecrated by the blood of our forefathers - may it no longer be polluted by the introduction of slavery."^9


**"SANGAMO CELEBRATION;" "Celebration at Alton;" and "Toasts, in PIKE COUNTY . . . in GREENE COUNTY . . . in EDGAR COUNTY;" "MORGAN COUNTY;" *Edwardsville Spectator*, July 12 and 19, 1823. See also "Toasts, in GREENE COUNTY . . . in EDGAR COUNTY;" "MORGAN COUNTY," *Edwardsville Spectator*, August 9, and September 20, 1823. Those who attended the celebration in Edgar County gave nine cheers after hearing a toast to "The spirit of Liberty - May it prevail at the next general election." The residents of Morgan County declared their determination to oppose the convention when they signaled their support for a toast declaring "Slavery - We swear to
Coles attended or was honored at many of these Fourth of July celebrations. Along with Daniel Pope Cook, he joined the celebration in Sangamon County where the attendants demonstrated the “respect due them on account of their firm, independent, and uniform republican conduct.” Greene County residents expressed their hope that he would be “Honored by the people of Illinois for his virtues and political integrity.” Similarly, those who celebrated in Morgan County declared “Governor Coles – May his example and firmness be received as an incontrovertible evidence of his attachment to the principles of equal rights, and inspire confidence in his administration.” Whether delivered at public dinners or Fourth of July celebrations, the anti-conventionists used their toasts, and the publication of them in the state’s newspapers, to establish their allegiance to the nation’s republican heritage. They sought to assure the public that they were committed to nurturing the development of a particularly republican society in Illinois. To that end, they portrayed themselves, through the leadership of Governor Coles, as virtuous, disinterested representatives of the people who intended to protect Illinois’s and the nation’s heritage of freedom and independence.

Perhaps most significantly, Coles and his fellow anti-convention leaders also organized local forces against the introduction of slavery by encouraging the establishment of anti-convention societies throughout the state. Two locations on the western side of the state, Edwardsville in Madison County and Belleville in St. Clair County, emerged as

oppose its introduction, on the last piece of ground, in the last ditch, to the last man, with his last breath.”

10Toasts, in SANGAMO CELEBRATION; “in GREENE COUNTY;” and “MORGAN COUNTY,” Edwardsville Spectator, July 12, August 9 and September 20, 1823. See also “FULTON COUNTY CELEBRATION,” Edwardsville Spectator, August 30, 1823.
the headquarters for their effort. Coles led the "defenders of liberty" in Edwardsville, who
were often referred to as "the Land Office clique" because they regularly held meetings at
the land office in the upper part of town. The Edwardsville anti-conventionists included
many of Coles's close friends, among them Reverend Thomas Lippincott, Judge Samuel
D. Lockwood, William P. M'Kee, Alexander Miller, and, whenever he was in town,
Representative Daniel Pope Cook. During their meetings, the men exchanged advice and
ideas on the antislavery essays they produced for publication. Additionally, they
communicated with anti-conventionists throughout the state, orchestrating the
establishment of local societies and caucuses, and enlisted individuals to travel the
countryside encouraging residents to vote against the convention.11

The residents of Belleville similarly called a meeting of its most distinguished
inhabitants to establish "The ST. CLAIR SOCIETY to prevent the further introduction of
slavery into the State of Illinois." Although not an officer of the society, Reverend John
Mason Peck wrote the constitution and public address produced by the meeting and
repeated many of the arguments that were becoming identified as the anti-conventionist
platform. He warned, for example, that the real object of his opponents was not
constitutional reform, but "the introduction of involuntary slavery" and claimed that their
behavior betrayed how much they were determined to disregard the will of "the
PEOPLE." He then called on like-minded individuals "to rally round the banner of
freedom," and instructed them to "adopt similar measures." Only by forming societies

11Lippincott, "Early Days in Madison County, No. 42," typescript, Thomas Lippincott Papers,
ISHS.
throughout the state. Peck predicted, could the anti-conventionists defeat their proslavery antagonists. Heeding Peck’s call, anti-conventionists in other counties formed their own organizations. Throughout the spring, summer and fall of 1823, published addresses and meeting notices from societies in Madison, Monroe, Sangamon, Greene, Edgar, Bond, Pike, Morgan, White and Lawrence counties appeared in the various state newspapers. Peck claimed that no less than “fourteen societies had been organized in as many counties” by the winter of 1823, all of which communicated with “the office in Belleville” to obtain “accurate knowledge . . . of the state and progress of the question.”

Coles understood that the public dinners, Fourth of July celebrations, and anti-convention society meetings served several important functions. They allowed the participants to claim allegiance to a particular side of the contest and displayed the strength of support for their cause. Not only were notices of the date and time of the meetings published in the newspapers, but so too were the names of many of those who attended and the individuals who spoke or composed the reports, addresses, and toasts.

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12 Address to the Board of Managers of the ST. CLAIR SOCIETY to prevent the further introduction of Slavery in the State of Illinois,” unsigned [Reverend John Mason Peck], Edwardsville Spectator, April 12, 1823. The officers of the St. Clair Society included John Messinger, president, David Blackwell, vice-president, Charles Woodworth, corresponding secretary, Edmund P. Wilkinson, recording secretary, Edward Mitchell, treasurer, and James Lemen and Samuel Mitchell, managers.

13 ADDRESS OF THE MONROE SOCIETY To the People of the State of Illinois, unsigned, Edwardsville Spectator, May 31, 1823. General James B. Moore was elected the chair of the meeting. “TO THE PEOPLE OF ILLINOIS,” unsigned [Thomas Lippincott], Edwardsville Spectator, July 12, 1823. Captain Curtiss Blakeman was elected chair and William P. M’Kee appointed secretary of the meeting. Others who attended included Thomas Lippincott, David Prickett, George Churchill, William Otwell, Benjamin Spencer, Amos Squire, John C. Riggin, George Smith, Charles Gear, Benjamin Stedman, Jarrot Dugger, John T. Lusk, William P. M’Kee, John Barber, and Thomas S. Slocum. For notices and addresses from other anti-convention society meetings and dinners, see Edwardsville Spectator, May 10, July 12, August 16, September 6, 20, and 27, 1823 and March 16, 1824. See also Brown, “Historical Sketch,” 37-38. Reverend John Mason Peck to Hooper Warren, March 27, 1855, Free West, May 3, 1855, reprinted in Alvord, ed., Governor Edward Coles, 334.
The events also provided a forum for the region's elites to publicize their opinion on the most important political issue of the day and, in the process, establish an explicit connection between themselves and the nation's revolutionary heritage. More often than not, the participants consciously employed particular phrases and words that were intended to convince the audience of their commitment to a common set of political ideals, such as republicanism and popular sovereignty. In this way, those who joined the societies and participated in the celebrations hoped to nurture a shared political culture with the voters and simultaneously generate support for their cause.

For Coles in particular, these events offered the opportunity to cultivate a broad base of support for his leadership that was not present at the time of his election. As both he and Warren testified, "between 40 & 50" attendants gathered together at the early March public dinner to pay "the Executive of our state, that honor to which he is so well entitled." To Coles's delight, he could also report that "an unusual degree of harmony and good feeling" pervaded the dinner, which was all the more gratifying to him because so many of the guests were opposed to one another on the convention issue. Perhaps most importantly, the content of the toasts offered at both the dinner and the Fourth of July celebrations emphasized Coles's political integrity, commitment to equal rights, and firmness as a leader. These rhetorical and public displays of support were intended to erase the fact that only thirty-three percent of the voters supported his election to the governorship, and, like the presidential levees and public dinners he attended in Washington City, they were similarly designed to overshadow the partisan divisions that
characterized the first legislative session of his gubernatorial term.14

The publication of these events, which were often reprinted in other newspapers throughout the state, created a dialogue between the elite leadership and the public.

Through the content, but especially the rhetorical style, of the statements, elite leaders attempted to fashion an image of themselves and their cause that they hoped would resonate most effectively with the electorate. They employed familiar phrases, such as “freedom” and “liberty,” when they described themselves and reserved more critical language, such as “sycophant” and “false,” for their opponents. Consequently, control of or access to public newspapers became an essential tool in the political campaign and buttressed individual anti-conventionists’s claim to authority in the community.15

As early as February 1823, Coles and the other members of the anti-convention leadership recognized the necessity of controlling the content of public discourse and, consequently, decided “to procure the support of some newspaper establishment, the

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14Edward Coles to Eliza Carter, March 15, 1823, Carter-Smith Papers, UVA; “MARK OF RESPECT,” Edwardsville Spectator, March 8, 1823. The antagonism between the legislature and Governor Coles was so intense that he encountered great difficulty getting his appointments approved. See “Message of Governor Coles to the Senate,” February 14, 1823 and Edward Coles to John G. Lofton, February 16, 1823, reprinted in Washburne, Sketch of Edward Coles, 138-41. See also Edward Coles to James Madison, April 25, 1823, Edward Coles Papers, CHS. Even after the convention question was decided, Coles’s political enemies continued to undermine his authority. In October 1824, the Senate rejected his nomination of Morris Birkbeck for the position of Secretary of State. See Edward Coles to Morris Birkbeck, September 22, 1824 and Morris Birkbeck to Edward Coles, October 9, 1824, reprinted in Washburne, Sketch of Edward Coles, 194-97.

conductor of which will take a firm and manly stand against the introduction of slavery.” Hooper Warren emerged as the most logical choice. Committed to preventing the expansion of slavery across the Ohio River, Warren had proven his antislavery credentials by publishing essays against Missouri’s bid to become the twelfth slave state, opposing the elections of both John M’Lean and Elias Kent Kane, and exposing the existence of a “slave party” in Illinois as early as 1820. Twenty-two anti-convention subscribers pledged one hundred and ninety-five, but eventually raised one thousand, dollars in state paper, and delivered the sum to Warren by March 1823. Consequently, the Edwardsville Spectator became the main source of anti-convention essays and articles during the initial months of the contest.  

To Coles’s disappointment, Warren’s commitment to the anti-convention cause hardly led the editor to suppress his personal animosity toward him. As Coles bitterly complained to his friend Nicholas Biddle, “four out of five of the newspapers printed in this State” supported the convention and “the only press whose Editor is in favor of freedom,” he revealed, “has rendered himself unpopular with many by his foolish and passionate attacks upon many of the prominent men on his side of the question.” From Coles’s perspective, Warren lacked the republican sensibility necessary for him to elevate   


17Edward Coles to Nicholas Biddle, April 22, 1823, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, Firestone Library, Princeton University (hereafter PU).
the anti-convention cause above his own personal interests and petty jealousies.

Coles and the anti-convention leadership attempted to resolve this problem by expanding the number of newspapers committed to their cause and distributing pamphlets and essays espousing their views. Aware that Edwards County contained a number of residents who had immigrated to the state under “the firm belief that we should not be disturbed by the clanking . . . fetters of Slavery,” Coles recommended that the antislavery residents in the county establish a newspaper to facilitate the circulation of anti-convention articles and essays. “It has occurred to me,” he informed Richard Flower, “that the good cause would be greatly promoted by establishing a printing press on the Eastern side of the State.” Albion, above all other locations, seemed ideal, he continued, because “there . . . and [in] its vicinity, many persons [resided] who wield chaste and powerful pens, and who have the means” to subscribe to the new public print. If Flower chose to bypass the opportunity, Coles confessed that he also intended to “write and ask the same favor of Mr. Birkbeck.”

When it became clear that neither man was willing to finance and manage a new newspaper on the eastern side of the state, Coles turned his attention elsewhere. The Illinois Intelligencer had been thrust into turmoil in the early months of 1823. The paper’s two editors, William C. Berry and William H. Brown possessed contradictory political views precipitating an internal division. In an effort to retain control of the paper, the pro-conventionist members of the state legislature selected the Vandalia newspaper to

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be the public printer, removed the antislavery Brown from the editorship and appointed pro-conventionist Robert Blackwell to join Berry at the helm. Coles immediately determined that the editorial turmoil, and subsequent financial difficulties, plaguing the newspaper provided him with a golden opportunity to secure a second mouth-piece for his cause. After pursuing the acquisition for "nearly twelve months" Coles finally secured ownership of the newspaper in early 1824. He removed Berry and Robert Blackwell from the editorship and replaced them with David Blackwell, the previous editor's brother, an officer of the St. Clair anti-convention society, and the newly appointed Secretary of State. Installed in his new post by May 1824, David Blackwell provided the anti-convention forces with a second publishing resource during the last, and most crucial, months of the contest.

Coles and other anti-conventionists also attempted to expand their influence over public opinion by collecting, duplicating, and distributing pamphlets and essays supporting their cause. Coles, for example, enlisted the aid of his antislavery friends outside of the state when he asked Nicholas Biddle to help him "promote the virtuous cause in which I am inlisted [sic], by giving me information, or refering [sic] me to the sources" that could "elucidate the general character and effects of Slavery." In particular, Coles instructed his

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19 Editorial, *Illinois Intelligencer*, February 15, 1823. The article and editorial comment was reprinted with commentary in the *Edwardsville Spectator* on February 22, 1823.

friend to obtain copies of material describing the “moral, political, & social effects” of slavery, “facts showing its effects on the price of Lands, and general improvement and appearance of a Country,” and, he continued, “of labour, both as it respects Agriculture and manufactures.”

Biddle immediately responded, pledging to furnish “all the assistance which I can give or procure.” He informed Coles that he had “already engaged two of our most active gentlemen familiar with the subject who will cheerfully & zealously contribute to your support.” Additionally, he enclosed the first product of his effort, a pamphlet that “goes directly to the question of the superiority of free over slave labor.” A week later, Coles received a letter from Philadelphia antislavery activist Roberts Vaux, one of the two men Biddle had contacted on his behalf. Astonished “that any part of the inhabitants of your state should wish to introduce a system which is generally reprobated,” Vaux offered “my own, and the services of a few of my friends, in this interesting cause.” He proposed to make “judicious selections from writers whose purpose is to show the iniquity and impolicy of slavery,” arrange for them “to be printed in the Tract form . . . and forwarded to Illinois for gratuitous distribution.” Indeed, before the summer of 1824, when the contest was at its most intense, Coles had received at least two shipments of pamphlets, collections he duplicated and distributed throughout the state.

By the spring of 1824, then, Coles and his followers had successfully organized

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21Edward Coles to Nicholas Biddle, April 22, 1823, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.

22Nicholas Biddle to Edward Coles, May 20 and 26, 1823, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU; Roberts Vaux to Edward Coles, May 27, 1823, “Letters of Governor Edward Coles,” 171-72. Coles received two shipments of pamphlets, paid for two thousand copies of each essay, and provided for their distribution to the residents of the state as well as their republication in the local newspapers.
their forces against the call for a convention. They used public dinners and Fourth of July celebrations to identify their leaders and ensure their public authority by defining themselves as the defenders of freedom and liberty, and thereby assuring the public that they were committed to promoting a free and independent society. At the grass-roots level, local leaders established anti-convention and anti-slavery societies, the purpose of which was to spread information, involve even the most isolated residents in the contest, and generate support for their cause by informing local residents that the legalization of slavery was the real issue under discussion. They also sought to control the content of the statewide political discourse by gaining control and establishing newspapers in every region of Illinois, as well as by gathering, reproducing, and circulating antislavery literature. As they attempted to establish their own authority among the people of the state, Coles and his supporters increasingly employed innovative political tactics that laid the foundation for a rhetorical campaign that pitted those opposed to against those in favor of slavery and expedited the region's transition to a more democratic political culture.

Despite their organizational zeal, the anti-conventionist cause exhibited important internal divisions that threatened to undermine their effectiveness. From the outset, their forces contained two recognizable factions: abolitionists and exclusionists. Although a minority, the abolitionists hoped to use the convention crisis to eliminate all remnants of slavery in Illinois and revise the state's black codes. More than any other individual, Coles personified the abolitionist perspective. By the conclusion of his gubernatorial campaign, nearly every resident knew that he had emancipated his enslaved property. Additionally,
most Illinoisans suspected that his republican sensibilities meant he not only wanted to see slavery abolished, but also believed that blacks should be treated as equals. As he had stated in his inaugural address and would repeat often throughout the convention contest, “justice and humanity require . . . us” to reform Illinois society so that it more accurately reflects the republican vision initially espoused by Jefferson and his fellow-revolutionaries.\(^2\)

The second, and most dominant, group of anti-convention supporters accepted the slave system that already existed in Illinois, but wanted to exclude any further immigration of black persons, enslaved or free. These exclusionists, who often counted slaveholders among their numbers, fashioned arguments designed to resonate with a Southern-born audience who feared the negative consequences of a growing black population. One anonymous editorialist, for example, warned that if “the importation of slaves, and their constituent manumission” were legalized in Illinois, the population of the state would be “Dark . . . in complexion, but infinitely darker in moral character!” The exclusionists sought to “whiten” Illinois society by prohibiting the immigration of all black people and marginalizing those who already lived in the state. By consistently portraying their adversaries as slave mongers and linking the spread of slavery to the threat of racial violence and social degradation, the anti-conventionists, both abolitionist and exclusionist, made a powerful appeal to the sensibilities of the state’s Southern-born non-slaveholding

\(^{2}\)“Fellow Citizens of the Senate and House of Representatives,” December 5, 1822, by Edward Coles, Edwardsville Spectator, December 14, 1822. See also, Commonplace Book, Volume VIII, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.
residents.\(^\text{24}\)

Coles was confident that the diversity of perspectives apparent among the anti-conventionists could be used to their advantage. While remaining under the umbrella of a statewide leadership, each faction could present the public with a variety of arguments on behalf of the anti-convention cause. By targeting the feelings and interests of particular local audiences in this way, Coles and his legislative colleagues hoped to forge a link between the state, local leaders and the general public. The end result, he hoped, would be the formation of a statewide coalition of support strong enough to defeat the pro-conventionists. Throughout the contest, the anti-conventionists leadership in the legislature and on the county-level followed Coles’s lead and attempted to consolidate support behind their cause by chanting “Convention and Slavery, No Convention and Freedom,” at every opportunity.\(^\text{25}\)

The pro-conventionists, still basking in the euphoria of their legislative victory, saw little reason to organize their forces formally during the early months of the campaign. Slaveholders or proslavery men already controlled three of the state’s four newspapers, and would eventually add a fifth to their arsenal. Further bolstering their confidence, a majority of the state’s proslavery residents also exercised political power well beyond their


numbers. They elected slaveholders to nearly every top local and national office. In 1818, the governor, secretary of state, congressional representative, both U.S. senators, and almost thirty percent of the state legislature either owned slaves or held proslavery views. By 1823, when the legislature passed the convention resolution, only Coles and Congressman Daniel Pope Cook opposed slavery among the state's top officials, while proslavery and slaveholding politicians expanded their control of the state legislature, increasing their presence there to sixty percent. "Our Governor is a plain good sort of man," observed one resident, "but many of our most influential public officials are dear lovers of Slavery and would gladly introduce into this state the same system which prevails in the South."26

Like their anti-convention antagonists, the pro-convention forces contained factions that competed for prominence. Most visible early in the campaign was a politically powerful contingent of proslavery men who unequivocally supported the expansion of slavery and the creation of a full-fledged slave system in Illinois. A second group of pro-convention men admitted that slavery was an evil, but believed that the subordination of black people was essential to the establishment of a stable social order. These subordinationists, then, viewed the legalization of slavery as the most efficient means of controlling the enslaved and free blacks who already lived in the region. A third band of pro-conventionists argued that if slavery spread westward, the horrors of the

system, for both white masters and black slaves, would diminish and the institution would eventually disappear. Like the subordinationists, diffusionists acknowledged that slavery was an immoral institution, but, unlike their colleagues, they believed the expansion of slavery over a broader territory, when coupled with a colonization program, offered the only mechanism for the system's gradual demise.27

During the first few months of the contest, those who favored the convention had little reason to worry that their internal divisions would undermine their success. As Coles had disappointedly discovered when he settled in Edwardsville in 1819, the slave system had been expanding during the initial years of statehood. Moreover, the majority of the state's residents were Southern-born yeomen farmers who migrated into the Old Northwest in pursuit of economic independence. Although some of these Southerners may have immigrated to Illinois because of a moral or ideological opposition to slavery, like Coles, the vast majority of them moved to the region to escape a hierarchical social order that placed the wealthy, educated, and propertied over the poor and landless inhabitants of the South. Such a distaste for the Southern social order, however, rarely meant these residents supported the abolition of slavery. Instead, most white Southern-born Illinoisans despised the presence of both the wealthy elites who controlled the political and social order from above as well as the black residents, enslaved and free, whom they viewed as an inferior class.28


Perhaps most encouraging for the pro-conventionists, the largely Southern-born population endured what many residents termed "hard times" during the first years of statehood. Subsistence farming dominated the state's early economy. Most farmers cultivated fields of corn, wheat and occasionally cotton and tobacco. They also raised hogs and cattle, and produced much of what they needed at home, purchasing any other necessaries at a local store on credit. Few residents produced enough surplus to trade on the market. By the 1820s, however, many residents aspired to achieve more than mere subsistence. Instead, they pursued a future in which they owned their own land and employed enough laborers to produce a surplus to sell on the market in New Orleans. They also hoped to sell their improved farms to the settlers who would follow them westward, making a nice profit in the process. As John Reynolds recalled, new settlers "paid out all the money they had in first installments," intending to sell their farms "before the other payments became due." More than anything else, the pursuit of economic independence, whether secured through subsistence or market participation, shaped the way the settlers responded to the world around them.

The Panic of 1819, however, stymied the ambitions of most Illinois farmers.


\textsuperscript{29}Reynolds, \textit{My Own Times}, 144-52. Regarding the coexistence of subsistence and market oriented farm production, see Simeone, \textit{Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois}, 42-49.
Declining land values, a severe labor shortage, and a depreciated currency compromised even the most diligent farmer. Worse still, emigration into the state nearly halted, eliminating the promise of new land purchasers. The pro-conventionists offered slavery as the solution to the state's economic woes, promising that its legalization would provide residents with sorely needed laborers and induce wealthy slaveowning immigrants to settle in Illinois where they would spend their money on improved farms. As one resident asked, "What is the only strong inducement held out to the voters for slavery? Inquire of every candid advocate for the measure," he responded, "and he will tell you, it is pecuniary interest — a relief from his distress, his embarrassments." The apparent growth of the slave system, regional character of the state's population, and declining economic conditions together led pro-conventionists to believe that the state's non-slaveholding majority would support the convention resolution.

The pro-conventionists, whose motto was "Convention or death," soon realized, however, that their failure to organize had allowed the opposition to gain public support. As early as May, 1823, Coles proclaimed that he was "begin[ning] to think we shall be able to defeat the slave party." Similarly, Horatio Newhall informed his brothers in Massachusetts that although a majority of the people appeared to support the convention

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at the close of the legislative session, "The free party have been as industrious as possible." As a result, "a pretty considerable change has taken place in public sentiment." He boasted that "if the vote should be taken now, a majority of 2000 would oppose a convention." By September, Coles's confidence had increased. He informed his old friend Nicholas Biddle that "the advocates of a convention have been losing ground."^31

Just three months later, however, the context of the convention contest changed dramatically when the pro-conventionists gathered at a public meeting in Vandalia, the state capital. "Nearly all the friends of the convention," observed Coles, "have been here and held caucuses, . . . adopted sundry resolutions, and made many arrangements." Additionally, like the anti-conventionists, those in favor of a convention "appointed committees for each county . . . [and] in each township" in order to influence public opinion. The residents of Fox River in White County, for example, met in and passed a resolution denying that slavery had anything to do with the convention question. They also vowed to form a "committee of correspondence . . . to communicate with other groups like themselves in other towns and counties throughout the state." At a convention meeting in Fairfield, Wayne County, the inhabitants affirmed their right to revise or abolish the constitution. Similarly, over seventy residents of Pope County declared their support for the convention. With just eight months left in the convention contest, pro-conventionists rallied behind their leaders and, like their opponents,

^31 Horatio Newhall to [J&J] Newhall, May 21, 1823, Horatio Newhall Papers, folder 1, ISHL; Edward Coles to Nicholas Biddle, September 18, 1823, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.
coordinated their forces.  

With their organizational zeal rejuvenated, pro-conventionists immediately focused their attention on discrediting the most visible anti-convention leader in the state, Governor Edward Coles. Three days after the pro-conventionists met in Vandalia, the state house caught fire, destroying the building and most of the public records housed there. Coles inspired the enmity of his opponents when he refused to sign a subscription for the rebuilding of the state house. Outraged at his refusal, "a number of persons collected together" to protest their governor's actions by repeatedly sounding "the cry of fire" throughout the night. By two in the morning the group had transformed into a mob "composed of the lowest class of the community." Angered over Coles's obstinacy, they built "a man of straw, which the mob called the Governor! -- and which was burnt, amid the groans of the mob, and the cry of State House or Death!" Writing to his friend Roberts Vaux afterward, Coles claimed that the mob was composed of "the friends of a Convention" and declared that they had "paraded the streets, nearly the whole night, giving vent to their spleen against me, in the most noisy and disrespectful manner." He felt that, while they complained of his refusal "to rebuild the State House," their real "passions" were the result of "my opposition to a Convention." In accordance with their overall strategy, the pro-conventionists primary goal, he confessed, was "to render me," and the anti-conventionists generally, "unpopular" with the people.  

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33"Another Mob at Vandalia, Extract of a letter, dated December 10, 1823," *Edwardsville Spectator*, December 13, 1823; Edward Coles to Roberts Vaux, January 21, 1824, Vaux Family Papers,
Coles's troubles, however, were only just beginning. Two weeks later, Coles suffered a considerable personal loss when “about two thirds of all the buildings and enclosures on my Farm” outside of Edwardsville were consumed by fire. Not only was the small farmhouse occupied by Kate and Robert Crawford and their children destroyed, but so too, was the extensive fruit orchards Coles had planted and nourished over the previous several years, as well as the fencing that protected his crops from the local wildlife. Anticipating the intense and time-consuming labor that would be required to repair a property that was already barely supporting itself financially, Coles was forced to contemplate renting his farm. Whether the result of malicious pro-conventionists determined “not only to injure my standing with the people, but to break down my pecuniary resources” as he suspected or the product of an unfortunate prairie fire common in Illinois, the fire in Edwardsville appeared to be just one more incident among many aimed at discouraging Coles from continuing his opposition to the convention.34

The most unsettling assault on Coles, however, occurred in early January 1824 when the pro-conventionists brought charges against him for illegally emancipating his slaves. According to a law passed in March 1819, but not published until October, any individual who brought slaves into the state for the purpose of setting them at liberty was

HSP; Edward Coles to Morris Birkbeck, January 29, 1824, “The Letters of Governor Edward Coles,” 180-83. See also Mary Carter to Rebecca Coles, February 18, 1824, Carter-Smith Family Papers, UVA. Mary Carter, Coles’s sister, informed her mother that Walker Gilmore, who had just returned from a trip to Illinois, revealed that Edward “has not lost his popularity that the Mob was composed of the lowest grade of society: and to assure you from him that no importance ought to be attached to it.” Coles first mentioned the state house fire on December 11, 1823. See Edward Coles to Roberts Vaux, December 11, 1823, Vaux Family Papers, HSP.

required to post a bond to ensure that they did not become a burden to the county. Because the slaves he emancipated entered Illinois as free individuals, Coles believed, and several lawyers confirmed, that the law did not apply to him. At the behest of Theophilus W. Smith, the pro-convention senator and editor of the Illinois Republican, a resident of Madison County issued a complaint to the County Commissioners in August 1824, demanding that they institute a suit against Coles to force him to pay a bond for each of his ex-slaves. The request remained tabled for most of the fall and winter, but was resurrected the following January at the urging of, as Coles later claimed, “a worthless and malignant partisan.” Employing Henry Starr and Samuel D. Lockwood, two prominent anti-conventionists, as his lawyers, Coles attempted to defend himself and avoid paying a monetary penalty in a suit he believed was little more than a “party proceeding.”

The pro-conventionists hoped to accomplish several things by instituting the suit against Coles. He had already concluded that the contest would require so much of his attention that he would not be able to oversee his farm personally and had arranged for Robert and Kate Crawford to manage the property in his absence. In this way, he had prepared himself to focus exclusively on supporting the anti-convention cause. By involving Coles in a legal battle, the pro-conventionists intended to distract him from his preferred occupation with a personal crisis. Coles had also pledged his entire annual salary of one thousand dollars to the support of the anti-conventionist cause. Several pro-

conventionists hoped that the price of attorney and legal fees would divert those funds away from the contest. Perhaps most importantly, the pro-conventionists attempted to manipulate the region's strong anti-black prejudice to their own benefit by encouraging residents to draw a connection between Coles's alleged unlawful act of emancipation and the growing free black population in the state. The suit, then, was part of a broader strategy designed to encourage voters to equate Coles in particular, but the anti-conventionists generally, with emancipation, free blacks, and lawlessness.

Coles assured his friends, however, that the "unrelenting and cruel persecution, which aims to destroy, not only my political influence, but my personal character and property," had failed to dissuade him "from promoting the cause of freedom." He confessed that the recent experiences had caused him to reflect upon his actions "to see whether it has been correct." He concluded that "I have not given just cause of offence to any one; . . . the only complaint against me," he continued, "is that I am a friend to the equal rights of man, and am considered a barrier to my opponents acquiring the power of oppressing their fellow man." When viewed in this light, he revealed, "I am gratified that Providence has placed me in the van of this contest, and I am truly thankful that my system is so organized as to leave no room for doubt, fear, or hesitation."36

Coles's public stance contrasted sharply with the impressions and anxieties he expressed to his family. In the midst of the pro-conventionist assault on him, Coles confessed to his niece that he had spent most of "a very lonely and disagreeable winter . . . constantly . . . on the look out during the continuance of the great political storm which is

36Edward Coles to Roberts Vaux, January 21, 1824, Vaux Family Papers, HSP.
raging with so much violence in this State. Nearly my whole time,” he continued, “is engaged in watching the movements of my opponents, contradicting their secret machinations and open misrepresentations; and of endeavouring to enlighten the people on the question.” While he willingly accepted the burden ofshouldering most of the animosity of his political opponents when discussing them with his allies and friends, Coles reserved his true feelings for his family members. “There may be honor,” he informed his niece, “but there is not pleasure in being Governor to such people at such a crisis.”

By the spring of 1824, then, both sides had settled in for a long rancorous contest. Each side possessed a recognizable and authoritative leadership with the requisite political skills to promote their cause effectively. Pro- and anti-conventionists alike also organized at the local level, formed associations and societies the goal of which was to mobilize the public and convince them to cast their ballot on their behalf. Likewise, each faction sought to control the tone and content of the public discourse by consolidating control of local newspapers and circulating essays and pamphlets justifying the exclusion or inclusion of slavery. Few residents would have disagreed with Horatio Newhall when he observed that “[t]he convention question is a dish which is daily nay hourly served up. It furnishes all our food for conversation, for reading and for newspaper scribblings.”

During the last three months of the contest, Coles led the anti-conventionist final assault by authoring a series of essays designed not only to discredit his opponents but

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38Horatio Newhall to [J&J] Newhall, April 14, 1824, Horatio Newhall Papers, Folder 1, ISHL.
also to convince the public of the immorality and potentially destructive character of
slavery. In his first publication, he attacked the opposition by imploring his audience to
evaluate critically the behavior of the pro-conventionists. He observed that those who
supported the call for a convention “expected” the residents of the state “to give their
approbation to a call of a convention, without knowing its object, merely upon the
recommendation of their Representatives,” and without allowing the voters “to enquire
into & discuss” the reasons for a convention. He warned his readers that the pro-
conventionists intended to “lull” the voters “into acquiescence and gain their object,” the
legalization of slavery, “by singing the Syren song of the peoples rights; the people are
sovereign; the people cannot err.” Additionally, he maintained that the pro-conventionists
concealed their true purpose behind the veil of popular sovereignty because they knew
that the introduction of slavery was “not consonant with the interests or wishes of the
people.” “Is this treating the people with respect?,” asked Coles. Men so devoid of
“political virtue and wisdom, of . . . stern Republican principle, [and] of that political and
moral worth” so essential to republican government, concluded Coles, “should not be
trusted” with altering or amending the constitution.39

As Coles’s rhetorical style revealed, in their efforts to mobilize the voting public,
the leaders on both sides of the contest initially competed for the reputation as the true
defenders of the people’s interest, for the label of “republicans.” The pro-conventionists
maintained that it was “the right of the people to modify” their government whenever they

Intelligencer*, May 14, 1824 (original in Edward Coles Collection, HSP).
pleased, and accused their opponents of depriving the electorate "of their dearest rights."

Those in favor of the convention portrayed themselves as "enterprizing and republican supporters" of the people, and warned their audience not to be bullied by their "federalist" antagonists, men "so base, selfish, or aristocratical" that they viewed themselves to be "above the control of the people." The anti-conventionists reassured the public that they firmly believed that representatives were accountable to the people, a principle, they reminded their audience, that "will never be questioned." Encouraging the public "to rally round the banner of freedom," the anti-conventionists consistently identified themselves as the "defenders of liberty" and the "friends of freedom," and attempted to convince the electorate that opposing the convention really meant voting in favor of freedom and liberty. By rejecting the convention and slavery, they maintained, the residents of Illinois would prove "to the admiring world, that the principles which warmed the bosoms of their ancestors, still burns in theirs."

As Coles understood after observing his fellow-Illinoisans react to the Missouri controversy, the appearance of this strategy was certainly nothing new. On the national level, debate over Missouri statehood focused on the balance of power between the North and South in Congress, with antislavery forces charging that adding another slave state to

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41"Address to the Board Managers of the ST. CLAIR SOCIETY to prevent the further introduction of Slavery in the State of Illinois," unsigned [Reverend John Mason Peck], Edwardsville Spectator, April 12, 1823; Thomas Lippincott, "Early Days in Madison County, No. 42," originally published in Alton Telegraph, 1864-65, typescript, Thomas Lippincott Papers, ISHS; and "FOR THE SPECTATOR," signed, "FREEDOM," Edwardsville Spectator, June 7, 1823.
the Union would expand the already disproportionate share of power enjoyed by Southern members of Congress because of the three-fifths clause of the Constitution. More importantly, Northern politicians argued that the three-fifths clause was unrepresentative because it ensured the reign of the propertied over the people. The egalitarian assumptions of the emerging “Age of the Common Man,” many proclaimed, demanded that the people, not the wealthy, rule.42

Coles also knew that, for Illinoisans in particular, the Missouri controversy caused many voters to impose new demands on their elected officials. By the late spring and early summer of 1819, after the Fifteenth Congress failed to resolve the Missouri question, the residents of Illinois used the months preceding the next congressional session and the coming congressional election to make their views on slavery known to their representatives. All three of Illinois’s congressional members favored Missouri’s petition to enter the Union as a slave state. Several editorialists accused Representative John M’Lean and Senators Ninian Edwards and Jesse B. Thomas of not representing “the wishes and interests of our state” and frequently asked, “have they, by their votes, spoke the voice of their constituents?” In the approaching election for the House of Representatives between M’Lean and Cook, the residents of the state answered this question emphatically by pledging “not to support any candidate . . . who either advocate[s] the right of slavery or who is actually a slaveholder.”43

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M'Lear's vote in favor of Missouri statehood emerged as the central issue of the campaign and was a major contributing factor to his defeat. With the victory of Cook, who had promised “to arrest the progress of slavery across the Mississippi” River, voters stated loudly that “a large majority of the people” objected to admitting Missouri as a slave state.\(^4\) Aware that the state’s proslavery politicians continued to conspire to legalize slavery in Illinois despite the clear statements of the voters in 1819 and 1820, the electorate had likewise made slavery the central issue in the 1822 gubernatorial election, demanding that the candidates reveal their position on the issue before they cast their ballots. Although his marginal victory in that contest seemed to indicate that the majority of the residents might prefer a proslavery governor, Coles remained confident that his inaugural request for the abolition of slavery in the Prairie State accurately reflected the interests and wishes of the majority of Illinois’s residents. By the mid-1820s, then, it was hardly surprising that both sides of the convention campaign recognized the necessity of emphasizing their commitment to representing the will of the people as they competed for the mantel of the true representatives of the common man.

Ironically, in their eagerness to muster public support by boasting of their accountability to the people, Coles and the pro- and anti-convention leadership contributed to a fundamental shift in political power in Illinois. Where the political elite initially controlled the contours of public debate, the unprecedented need for popular

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*Edwardsville Spectator,* June 5, 1819.

consent during the convention crisis provided the general electorate with an opportunity to determine the focus of the political discourse. By the spring of 1824, it mattered little which side was aristocratic or republican, for, after their experiences during the Missouri controversy and the gubernatorial race of 1822, residents had become suspicious of any political leader who slung anti-republican insults at their opponents, a skill both sides had mastered equally. As a result, most of Illinois's small farming residents insisted that their political leaders abandon republican rhetoric and focus the debate on "how slavery is to do good to me, and the like of me -- that is four citizens out of five in the State." From that point forward, both pro- and anti-conventionists were forced to explain the advantages and disadvantages of introducing slavery for the average small, and Southern-born, farmer. As a result, a comparison of free and slave labor and democratic and aristocratic society dominated the rhetoric of the convention campaign.45

This was just the type of debate Coles wanted the convention contest to provoke. Throughout his residence in Illinois, he had worked tirelessly to promote the region's economic and political development. As Register of the Land Office, he oversaw the equitable distribution of land and when the Panic of 1819 threatened to destroy Illinoisans's hope for economic independence, Coles vigorously administered the government's land reform policies. Similarly, as founder and president of the Illinois Agricultural Society, Coles regularly published essays encouraging farmers to diversify.

45 "To the Editor of the Illinois Gazette," signed, "Jonathan Freeman [Morris Birkbeck]." Illinois Gazette, June 14, 1823. To be sure, other arguments in favor or against slavery emerged throughout the campaign. Participants on both sides of the contest turned to the Bible to appeal to residents's sense of humanity. For the role of divine law, see Dillon, "The Antislavery Movement in Illinois," 98-105 and Simeone, Democracy and Slavery, 166-96. See also the numerous editorials that appeared in the Edwardsville Spectator, Illinois Gazette, and Illinois Republican between July and November 1823.
their crops, supplement their agricultural pursuits with livestock management, promoted the development of local manufacturing, and directed the residents of the state to support the funding of internal improvements. He repeated these desires in his 1822 inaugural address. Coles, then, had always envisioned Illinois as a society of free and independent men whose commitment to republican virtue required that they not only promote the agricultural development of the region, but also the state's place in the nation's internal economy. From his perspective, the residents of Illinois had a duty to protect their political freedom and independence by promoting the economic development of the state, something he believed the legalization of slavery would prevent.46

Answering the demands of the electorate, pro-conventionists attempted to garner public support by arguing that the expansion of slavery into Illinois would improve the state's prosperity. The small, but vocal, proslavery faction of convention supporters depicted slavery as a positive good for the community. "If slavery was admitted," they asserted, "our country would populate in abundance, wealth would be in our country, [and] money would circulate." They based this argument on two assumptions. First, the pro-conventionists declared that enslaved labor was essential for the continuation of the saline works, Illinois's main source of manufactured salt to preserve meat for local consumption and transportation to the market in New Orleans. "A Plain Man" argued that

For Coles's agricultural recommendations, see "To the Farmers of the State of Illinois," signed "A Farmer of Madison County" [Edward Coles], Edwardsville Spectator, October 9, 1819. And for his inaugural address, see "Fellow Citizens of the Senate and of the House of Representatives, December 5, 1822," Edwardsville Spectator, December 14, 1822. On the national consequences of developing the economic ties between the Atlantic seaboard and the interior of the continent, see Peter S. Onuf, Statehood and Union: A History of the Northwest Ordinance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

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the rigors of the saline “is such as no white man . . . is willing to risk or able to endure.”
Black slaves possessed constitutions “better adapted to this climate . . . and [able to]
endure heat and watching far better than whites.” Besides, the author asked, “will any
white man . . . take [up] the slavish employments? . . . Would a white man for less than
fifty cents a day make himself the veriest slave of the community?” He hoped not only to
highlight the economic consequences of precluding the use of enslaved labor at the saline
works, but also to exploit his audience’s proclivity to view any labor performed by blacks
as best handled by slaves. The implication was that such work degraded any white man
forced to perform it. Unlike their proslavery counterparts in the East, whose positive
good arguments emphasized that slavery improved the condition of black people, these
Western defenders of slavery focused on the benefits slavery would bring to the white
community. Where slavery existed, they proclaimed, white economic prosperity
blossomed and equality among white people was guaranteed.47

Second, many pro-conventionists also argued that Illinois suffered from a labor
shortage. Introduce slavery, they announced, and all the residents of the state would have
access to enough laborers “to raise [an] abundance of products . . . perhaps enough to
commence some other manufactories [sic].” Confirming these claims, another editorialist
complained that he could not hire laborers to work his farm. Admit slavery, he predicted,
and even small farmers would be able to improve their own land. Whether they focused

47“TO THE PEOPLE OF ILLINOIS,” unsigned; “ON THE CONVENTION, NO. III,” signed “A
PLAIN MAN,” Illinois Gazette July 5 and 10, 1823. Regarding the defense of slavery in the East, see
Larry E. Tise, Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840 (Athens: The
University of Georgia Press, 1987), 97-123.

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on the saline works or a reported labor shortage, these overtly proslavery pro-
conventionists maintained that Illinois's economic prosperity depended upon the
introduction of slavery. If anyone doubted the truth of their statements, they instructed
the electorate to observe the prosperity of their slaveholding neighbor, Missouri. "Look,"
the pro-conventionists implored, "at those trains of wagons with their splendid teams, their
carriages and their gangs of negroes. They are going over to fill up Missouri, and make it
rich, while our State will stand still or dwindle, because you wont let them keep their
slaves here."^[48]

Pro-convention diffusionists offered yet another argument that echoed the positive
good tenor of their proslavery colleagues with two important exceptions. Unlike their
slavery-defending associates, diffusionists sought only the "qualified introduction" of
slavery by proposing to couple the expansion of the institution with "a system of gradual
emancipation." Conrad Will, a pro-convention member of the general assembly from
Jackson County, promised that such a program would restore "thousands to their liberty,
to whose bondage there is now no prospect of termination." Additionally, rather than
highlight the advantages slavery brought to white residents of the state, these qualified
supporters of slavery chose to emphasize the benefits the spread of the institution would
bestow on the black slaves. They argued that slaves "ought to be scattered over a wider
space, . . . in order that better profits to their master might procure better fare for them."
Similarly, "A Friend to Liberty" predicted that extending slavery into Illinois "will better

^[48]"TO THE EDITOR OF THE ILLINOIS GAZETTE," signed "X," Illinois Gazette, January 10,
1824; "For the Advocate," signed "A," Republican Advocate, June 5, 1823; and Lippincott, "Conflict of
the Century," typescript, Thomas Lippincott Papers, ISHS.

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the condition of slaves, comport more with liberty and produce their general emancipation from bondage at an earlier day than if they are confined to a more limited district.\

Collectively, the pro-conventionists attempted to cast a comprehensive spectrum of arguments designed to generate support among the broadest electorate possible. Although most likely attractive to only a fraction of the state’s residents, the proslavery faction sought to lure adherents to their cause by depicting slavery as a positive economic good for Illinois’s struggling farmers. Pro-convention diffusionists, on the other hand, claimed a more general middle ground, promising that while the temporary introduction of slavery would ensure economic prosperity, Illinoisans would be able to avoid the negative consequences of the slave system through the forced deportation of all enslaved laborers once they gained their freedom. Significantly, both pro-convention contingents pledged that the expansion of slavery would promote equality among all of the region’s white residents by ensuring that only black people performed the degrading tasks associated with slavery. Ultimately, this diverse pro-convention strategy targeted the racial prejudices and economic ambitions of the state’s predominately Southern-born yeoman farmers. By doing so, they acknowledged that whoever was most successful at manipulating this particular interest group would win the convention contest.

The anti-conventionists, who styled themselves the “friends of freedom,” attempted to undermine the pro-convention strategy by focusing on three specific issues. As Coles informed Roberts Vaux, they primarily sought to unveil slavery’s “impolicy and

injurious effects in retarding the settlement and prosperity of the State.” One anti-convention editorialist boasted that “the emigrants from the east will bring money, and industry - the very things we want.” He warned, however, that “emigrants from the south will bring us idleness, luxury, and the slow but fatal disease of slavery - the things we do not want.” Another editorialist predicted that encouraging slaveowners to immigrate into the state would stifle the development of manufactures and invite unfair market competition. “Democracy” claimed that slaveholders “are not men of manufacturing characters - they have seldom engaged in that business.” Worse still, he decried, “they will raise grain and stock by the help of their servile labor, and . . . will undersell the poor man, who raises such things by the labor of his own hands.” As Morris Birkbeck assured his audience, “if we vote faithfully against a convention, . . . true prosperity will begin to beam upon us.” Most of those who opposed the convention believed that introducing slavery would diminish, not increase, the prosperity of the state.50

The exclusionist faction of the anti-conventionists were particularly interested in demonstrating both the “superiority of free over slave labor” and that slavery “would operate to the injury of the poor or laboring classes of society.” One of the contest’s more prolific writers, “Martus,” claimed that “a white man in his own business, is more efficient than a black man in another’s.” He explained that “slavery destroys almost every inducement to action and to virtue; by withholding the rewards of industry and the virtues


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from the slave.” From his perspective, only free white labor would improve the prosperity of the state. Exclusionist opponents of the convention often recited statistics, comparing the productivity and prosperity of free and slave states, to support their contentions. Rev. Thomas Lippincott, the corresponding secretary for the “Madison Association to oppose the introduction of Slavery in Illinois,” compared Pennsylvania with Virginia. He found that both the property values and population increased more rapidly in Pennsylvania than in Virginia. He concluded that “the existence of slavery in one, and its non-existence in the other state, has caused the discrepancy.” The only way Illinois would prosper, they implied, was if slavery was excluded from the region.

Perhaps most appalling, many argued, slavery degraded white laborers. Citing an 1817 letter from Congressman R. G. Harper, of South Carolina, to the secretary of the American Colonization Society, Coles noted that “when the laboring class is composed . . . of slaves distinguished from the free class by color, features, and origin,” free men “are almost irresistibly led to consider labor as a badge of slavery, and, consequently, as a degradation.” Harper had claimed that “in a country where slaves are generally employed, . . . the mere circumstance of a freeman pursuing the same labour . . . [will] subject him to the contempt of the haughty master.” Ultimately, the introduction of slavery, according to the “friends of freedom,” threatened “to degrade honest but humble industry and sink the laborer.” Glorifying the advantages of free labor, Coles and his contemporaries sought to convince the electorate to oppose the convention by celebrating a social order that


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rewarded efficiency and honest industry with economic independence and equality among white men.52

Finally, both abolitionists and exclusionists opponents of the convention claimed that slavery inevitably led to a hierarchical social order that oppressed non-slaveholding whites. “Martus,” in the fifth installment of a series evocatively entitled “The Crisis,” claimed that slavery “begets in its possessor a haughty, insolent, oppressive, overbearing temper dangerous to liberty.” He feared that the immigration of slaveowners to Illinois would create a “practical aristocracy.” Morris Birkbeck warned Illinois’s small farmers that “the planters are great men, and will ride about, mighty grand, with their umbrellas over their head.” After the deluge of anti-convention articles, pamphlets, and speeches, the enemies of the convention hoped that few small farmers would doubt that “all equality is destroyed” in a slave state because a slaveholding “community tends . . . to divide the citizens into different ranks and different castes or classes.” From the perspective of the anti-conventionists, the very nature of Illinois society was at stake. In August 1824, voters would not only choose between enslaved and free labor, but also between aristocracy and democracy.53

All of these arguments proved most effective when the authors wove language laced with racial prejudice into their statements, betraying their preference not just for free


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labor, but for free white labor in particular. Recognizing that the terms were interchangeable, several editorialists substituted “free” for “white” and “black” for “slave” in their essays. “The labor of a free man is always more productive than the labor of the slave,” argued “Aristides,” because “the white laborer has an interest in his toil” while the “miserable horde of blacks” only produced as much as the master demanded. This perspective also led many of these purported “friends of freedom” to denigrate free blacks, a population they thought “always to be dreaded.” For example, one author warned that limiting slavery by coupling it with a gradual emancipation plan, as some of the pro-conventionists proposed, would leave Illinois “swarming with old free negroes, worn out in the service of their former master.” These newly freed blacks, he continued, would stroll “about the country, . . . begging and pilfering from house to house.” Another author described a far more alarming fate in which an expanding free black population “would soon . . . [have] it in their power to contend . . . for supremacy with the whites.” If Illinoisans hoped to prosper, Coles convincingly argued, they would have to preserve “these beautiful and fertile prairies . . . [for] our kindred descendants of Europe, who are like ourselves enlightened,” by excluding “the descendants of Africa, who are not only unlike us in person, but are to be a degraded race of slaves.” By employing racial language that emphasized not only the inferiority of blacks, but also characterized their presence in Illinois society as a threat to white safety and prosperity, the anti-conventionists exploited the strong aversion to blacks prevalent among their audience.54

Designed specifically to convince them to vote against the convention resolution, this multi-layered discussion targeted the Southern-born small farmer, who would easily recognize the world the writers described. As Abraham Carns informed his audience, “Many of us have been long accustomed to living in slave states, and we know the poor people in those states suffer.” He reminded his readers that before they moved to Illinois they “had to lock our cribs, meat houses and milk houses, through fear of the negroes.” He also warned that just as wealthy slaveowners watched “the poor white man . . . become the companion of slaves” when called upon to perform public works in the South, so too will “the haughty slaveholders . . . sit in the shade and drink their grog” as they observe their poor neighbors and slaves build roads across the prairie to facilitate the transportation of slave-produced goods to local markets. According to this author, few residents should doubt that the Southern social order would be replicated in Illinois should slavery be legalized. Similarly, an editorialist, who called himself “A Friend to Illinois,” confessed that “I was raised in a slave state,” and recalled that those “who are not able to hold or own them [slaves], will be almost levelled with them. This,” he declared, “I know from experience.” By reminding the state’s Southern-born residents why they left their native states and the dangers that would accompany opening Illinois’s borders to more black residents, enslaved and free, the anti-conventionists hoped to convince them to

Man Stealing,” Illinois Intelligencer, January 9, 1824; “To the Citizens of Illinois, No. 3,” signed “One of Many [Edward Coles],” Illinois Intelligencer, May 28, 1824. Individuals who opposed the convention did not have a monopoly on this type of language. For pro-convention examples, see “Brutus,” Illinois Intelligencer, July 5, 1823 and “On the Convention, No. III,” signed “A Plain Man,” Illinois Gazette, July 10, 1824. Regarding the importance of racial prejudice in the Old Northwest, see Berwanger, The Frontier Against Slavery.
exclude slavery from the Prairie State by voting against the convention.\textsuperscript{55}

As the convention vote neared, both sides publicly expressed their confidence, but privately feared their efforts would fail. For the anti-conventionists in particular, the fears were well founded. Not all of Illinois's Southern-born small farmers opposed the convention or slavery. Although they were "despised and trampled on . . . by the aristocratic slaveholders, and contemned [sic] even by slaves," recalled Lippincott, many poor Southern farmers "were found among the noisiest brawlers of the Convention." Asked why he supported the convention, one man replied that he "wasn't gwine to jine in with the darned Yankees." Others, who had left poverty behind when they moved to Illinois, believed that "their wealth might be enhanced and their ease promoted by owning one or more slaves." Slavery appealed to still others. According to Lippincott, men who had witnessed the "severe labor of their wives" and confronted "the difficulty of procuring domestic labor," viewed slavery as the only solution to their labor problems. As the date of the final vote approached, it became increasingly difficult to predict if the anti-conventionists could win the contest.\textsuperscript{56}

Despite growing concern that they might be defeated, the anti-conventionists’s

\textsuperscript{55}"Lawrence County . . . address," signed Abraham Carns, \textit{Edwardsville Spectator}, September 16, 1823; "Fellow-Citizens," signed "A FRIEND TO ILLINOIS," \textit{Edwardsville Spectator}, October 4, 1823. For a fuller discussion of the relationship between the free labor rhetoric employed during the 1820s in Illinois and the language that emerged during the 1850s, see Suzanne Cooper Guasco, "The Deadly Influence of Negro Capitalists": Southern Yeomen and the Resistance to the Expansion of Slavery in Illinois," \textit{Civil War History} 47 (March 2001), 7-29.

\textsuperscript{56}Lippincott, "Conflict of the Century," typescript, Thomas Lippincott Papers, ISHS; Edward Coles to Robert Vaux, January 21, 1824, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. The decision to employ enslaved laborers, as we have seen in Chapter 3, was not limited to the state's Southern inhabitants. See Christiana Holmes Tillson, \textit{A Woman's Story of Pioneer Illinois}, ed. Milo Milton Quaife (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 137-41.
fears remained unrealized. When the people of Illinois finally cast their ballots on August 2, 1824, they defeated the convention resolution by 1,688 votes. Eighteen counties, 6,640 individuals, or fifty-seven percent of the voting population rejected slavery [See TABLE 2 and FIGURE 4]. Although the gap between the votes in favor and against the resolution appeared to be small, the strength of the anti-convention victory was significant. In eight of the eighteen counties that opposed the convention, more than seventy percent of the voters cast their ballots against the resolution. Only two pro-convention counties garnered a similar majority. Additionally, in three of those eighteen anti-convention counties, more than ninety percent of the county’s voting residents rejected holding a convention. Furthermore, voter turnout reached an all-time high of nearly ninety-five percent, with 11,612 residents casting their ballots on that warm summer day. This was a significant increase over popular participation in previous state-wide elections. In the congressional campaign of 1820, for example, only 6,944, or fifty-four percent, of the state’s eligible voters cast their ballots. By the gubernatorial race of 1822, the percentage of residents who participated in the election increased to sixty-seven percent, but still remained significantly lower than the 1824 total. Two years after the convention vote, when the population rose considerably but the visibility of the slavery issue practically disappeared, the number of voters only increased by one thousand, reflecting an overall decline in voter turnout. As the slavery issue played an increasingly important role in Illinois’s political culture, voter turnout correspondingly magnified. More than any other
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Note: Bold print indicates those counties who voted against the resolution and the italics indicates a tie.

FIGURE 4

Convention Contest, 1824

ILLINOIS 1823

Convention Vote (August 2, 1824)

- For
- Against
- Tie

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issue, then, slavery motivated residents to participate in the political process.57

Significantly, a North-South division emerged from the voting results, paralleling the divergence between free and slave states that characterized the nation in the decades preceding the Civil War. This pattern remained a constant feature of Illinois politics throughout the antebellum period, but was particularly visible during the 1850s. As they debated the merits of the Wilmot Proviso, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, and the candidates in the 1858 senatorial election, Illinois’s Southern-born residents’ political actions continued to be buffeted by the same competing pressures. On the one hand, these transplanted Southerners did not like slavery and objected to its expansion, but they also rejected the notion that outsiders could interfere with the institution and resented Republicans who advocated meddling in the affairs of the South. On the other hand, this sympathy for the South was counteracted by the Southern yeoman’s distrust of the planter aristocracy. Having migrated to Illinois to escape the oppressive influence of a social order based on slavery, Southern-born Illinoisans remained suspicious of Southerners who were committed to the westward expansion of slavery. As in the 1820s, the Southern-born residents of 1850s-Illinois discovered a middle ground that acknowledged their competing sympathies. Popular sovereignty and the Democratic party offered an alternative that permitted them to remain uninfluenced by the Northern and Southern extremes on either side of the slavery issue as they determined for themselves the type of society in which they would live. And, as earlier, the middle ground these Southern-born

residents occupied was compatible with their prejudicial views of African Americans. As long as white liberties were protected, they continued to care little about the fate of black Americans.\textsuperscript{38}

In the end, the anti-conventionists won a decisive victory by publicizing the evils of the slave system and drawing out more Illinoisans than ever before. By celebrating the merits of free labor and the benefits of a democratic social order, Coles and his followers successfully articulated arguments that would resonate with the broadest possible coalition of voters. Exclusionists, those residents who did not want to see the size of the black population, both enslaved and free, increase under any circumstances, rejected the convention resolution in large numbers. Importantly, this group included slaveholders who wanted to retain their property but did not want to see more slaves imported into the state, and non-slaveholders who left the South to escape a slave society that granted a disproportionate share of political power to slaveowners. Joining this portion of the electorate was at least a small number of subordinationists, men who believed that slavery offered the most efficient means of securing a social order that elevated all whites above their black laborers. These men could reject the convention while remaining proslavery because their vote did not abolish slavery. On the contrary, it ensured that the slave system that already existed in Illinois would neither expand nor perish.

The final, and probably smallest, group of voters to reject the convention resolution were abolitionists: men like Edward Coles who hoped that the defeat of the

convention movement would be the first step toward abolishing every form of slavery in Illinois. Slave labor, however, remained a very visible part of Illinois's agricultural and domestic economy until the 1840s. The central concern that bound all of these anti-conventionists together was a shared understanding that the black population, whether enslaved or free, should not increase if Illinois was to prosper economically. By rejecting the convention resolution, they confidently announced that they had prevented the expansion of slavery and continued to maintain a firm commitment not to interfere with the institution where it already existed, a position that would emerge on the national level under the banner of the Free Soil party. On that fateful day in August, the residents demonstrated their preference for a white egalitarian society, populated by white independent yeomen farmers, by rejecting slavery and the hierarchical social order that placed the poor white farmer only slightly above the black slave.

For Edward Coles, the conclusion of the convention contest offered a mixture of glory and disappointment. He was proud of his "instrumental [role] in preventing a call of a Convention, and in making Illinois a Slave-holding State." His activities in Illinois would become the centerpiece of his reputation for the remainder of his life. Yet, the antagonistic behavior of his political enemies and the persistence of slavery tarnished the triumph. Despite their thorough defeat, the pro-conventionists continued to harass Coles. The suit instituted against him in January 1824 remained tangled in Illinois's court system. According to Coles, the judges, John Reynolds and Samuel McRoberts, and the jury foreman, Hail Mason, were pro-convention men determined to ruin his reputation and financial standing. Not only was he forced to contend with antagonistic participants, but
the judge refused to allow Coles to call witnesses, submit evidence, or testify on his own behalf. When Coles commented on the unfair proceedings of the court in the newspaper, McRoberts accused him of slander and filed a civil suit demanding $5000 in damages.

Eventually, both the original suit and the civil case were resolved, when in 1825, the state legislature passed a law releasing from penalty any person, including Coles, who failed to post a bond for the slaves they emancipated during the previous six years. That same year, the judges's civil case failed to progress beyond the complaint stage, earning a dismissal because of an absence of sufficient grounds to proceed.59

Coles also encountered an assault on his authority from within his own administration. During the summer and fall of 1825, Coles left the state to visit his family and friends in Virginia, Washington City, and Philadelphia. While he was away, Lieutenant Governor Adolphus Hubbard, a violent pro-convention man, attempted to wrest executive power away from Coles. Arguing that he had become acting governor when Coles left the state, Hubbard attempted to retain the position after Coles returned in October 1825. Both the state legislature and the supreme court refused to acknowledge Hubbard as governor and Coles resumed his duties without opposition. Coles informed his friend Roberts Vaux that he “attribute[d] the unexpected unanimity” of support for him in the legislature “to the circumstance of . . . the people . . . making known their opinions and feeling to their Representatives. . . . The current of public opinion on this question,” he concluded, “was too strong in my favor to be resisted by any but the most desperate

59Edward Coles, “History of the Ordinance of 1787,” ISHL; “Court Documents,” typescripts, Governor Edward Coles Papers, ISHS; Edward Coles to Roberts Vaux, January 8, 1826, in Washburne, Sketch of Edward Coles, 219-22; and “Sketch of the Emancipation,” Edward Coles Collection, HSP.
antagonist." Still, the open hostility to his authority was very unsettling for Coles. While he had witnessed firsthand the effects of personal politics while serving as James Madison's private secretary, Coles was astonished by the extent of animosity his opponents held for him. Like his mentor, however, Coles remained determined to rise above partisanship. He allowed others to defend his character, resorted to anonymous publications in the newspapers, and waited patiently as his enemies were defeated by the authority of public opinion, as well as, the legislature and court system.  

Perhaps most disheartening for Coles, slavery remained an integral part of Illinois's social and economic structure after 1824. The anti-conventionists successfully derailed the effort to legalize slavery, but the indenture system established during the territorial period continued to function unabated. Despite growing apathy toward the issue of slavery, Coles continued to push for the abolition of slavery in his succeeding gubernatorial addresses. In November 1824, he called the attention of the legislature to "the remnant of African Slavery which still existed in the State," and, in light of the people's rejection of the convention, instructed the members to make arrangements for the abolition of the institution. Similarly, on December 5, 1826, he "emphatically renew[ed], and earnestly press[ed]" his recommendation that the legislature make provisions for the gradual abolition of slavery and the "amelioration of our code in relation to free Negroes." Should they refuse to heed his call, Coles implored "the Representatives of a people who love liberty, and have resolved that their land shall be the land of the free, to adopt such

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measures as will ultimately put an end to slavery."

To Coles’s dismay, the Illinois legislature continued to promulgate laws that restricted free black rights, the Supreme Court failed to declare the indenture system illegal until the 1840s, and, rather than jump-starting an antislavery movement in Illinois, the convention struggle inspired a colonization movement that the state’s “antislavery” residents, like many Americans, concluded was the only solution to the problem of race relations in the region. While Coles continued to consider any society that countenanced the enslavement of other individuals a slave society, most Illinoisans, as the convention contest revealed, were content to believe that a community that contained a few enslaved laborers remained a free society. Despite these disappointments, Coles was proud of his own efforts to forge a society of free and independent republicans in Illinois. When he reflected on “the abuse I endured, the labor I performed, [and] the anxiety I felt,” Coles confessed that he remained consoled by the knowledge that he had never faltered from his principles and had performed an invaluable service in ensuring that Illinois would remain a free state.61

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Although he endured a great deal of hostility throughout his governorship, Coles left office a relatively popular figure. William Archer believed that Coles was “the best politician and in my opinion by far the most honest man in the state.” Nicholas Hansen,

reporting to Coles on the progress of the 1826 state legislature, informed the ex-governor that "no man refuses Edward Coles the character of an honest man and consistent politician; and it pleases me every day," he continued, "to hear men bear the strongest testimony to your real merits." Similarly, an anonymous author writing to the editor of the Illinois Intelligencer in June 1827, observed that Coles "had with a steady hand pursued the noblest tenor of his way, regardless of bar-room clamors and the malignant denunciations of aspirants." The author noted that Coles "is now returned to the people with the reputation of an honest man."⁶²

Such accolades led several of the state’s prominent men to encourage Coles to represent Illinois on the national level. In April 1831, Coles announced that he had "yielded to the wishes of a number of my friends," and agreed to become a candidate for the House of Representatives. As in the 1822 gubernatorial election, Coles cited his political experience as Register of the Land Office in Edwardsville and service as President James Madison’s private secretary as justification for his candidacy. He also added that his position as “the People’s Governor” made him more acquainted with the interests and concerns of the residents of Illinois than any of his opponents. Most significantly, Coles presented himself as a disinterested and virtuous candidate by informing the voters that "I am now once more called upon by many of the same high-minded people, without distinction of party, and who have no other motive than a desire to promote the public.

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good, to leave the pursuits of private life” to enter the public arena. He assured the voters that “I will not be the creature of party, nor the humble follower of any man.”

By the 1830s, however, Illinois’s political culture had undergone a dramatic transformation. The experience of participating in nominating committees and caucuses and identifying candidates with a particular issue during the convention contest laid the organizational groundwork for the emergence of party politics in Illinois. Once the convention vote resolved the slavery issue to the satisfaction of the state’s residents, Illinois voters placed increasing importance on a candidate’s affiliation with national political figures. In the congressional campaign of 1826, for example, committees and caucuses throughout the state supported Joseph Duncan, a self-proclaimed Jackson supporter, over Daniel Pope Cook, who had cast his ballot for John Quincy Adams in 1824. Charged with ignoring the sentiments of the majority, Cook was ousted from political office for supporting the wrong national politician in that presidential race. Similarly, one resident observed that by 1826 “the political division” in Illinois “was between supporters of John Quincy Adams and General Andrew Jackson, the yankees supporting Adams and the white people, Jackson.”

When he insisted that he should be judged according to “my moral and political

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63“To the People of Illinois,” signed Edward Coles,Edwardsville April 12, 1831, Illinois Intelligencer, April 16, 1831. See also Commonplace Book, Volume VIII, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.

principles" and past experience rather than his political affiliations, then, Coles fatefully misjudged the voters in Illinois and the evolving political culture of the United States as a whole. He continued to adhere to a set of old-style political habits that celebrated the virtues of republican leadership as epitomized by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. As one editorialist complained, Coles's commitment to nonpartisanship led many to doubt his ability as a politician and question the degree of influence he would wield in Congress. Conversely, his most prominent political opponents in the race for Congress, Joseph Duncan and Sidney Breese, each identified their political interests with Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay respectively. Even more detrimental to his political chances, Coles spent the entire winter and spring of 1831-1832 traveling in the East. Having refused to electioneer on his own behalf and absent from the state for much of the campaign, many voters wondered whether he really wanted to be elected. After years of personal and political persecution, he may have concluded that a political career was hardly worth the trouble. When the votes were finally tallied, Duncan, the incumbent, secured a landslide victory. His closest rivals, Breese and Coles, only garnered 4,520 and 3,304 votes respectively. More than any other event in Coles's political career, the congressional campaign of 1832 revealed the degree to which he was unwilling to embrace the democratic changes that increasingly defined the society around him. Disillusioned by the failure of Illinoians's to embrace the abolition of slavery, the increasingly rude character of politics, and his own inability to exercise public authority, Coles returned to

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the East and, as had been the case in 1819, faced a future full of uncertainties.
CHAPTER 6

"An herculean scheme of usefulness": Sociability and Slavery on the Eve of the Civil War

On the evening of November 28, 1833, forty-seven-year-old Edward Coles stood nervously in the parlor of Philadelphian Roberts Vaux, his good friend and antislavery ally from the Illinois convention contest. The room was crowded with guests, most of whom were prominent residents of the city. To Coles’s delight, the company also included several Southerners, among them his brother Tucker, sister-in-law Helen, and his younger sister, Betsy. The candles illuminating the parlor cast a warm light across the room, making the atmosphere contrast sharply with the cold nervousness that caused him to anxiously survey his surroundings. While he remained stationed by the fireplace, everyone else moved through the room freely, pausing occasionally to chat amiably with one another as they awaited the start of the ceremony. Within minutes the guests settled into silence and Coles turned to the entryway only to gaze upon the beautiful Sally Logan Roberts. As she crossed the room and took his arm, a calm feeling overtook him. Then, together, they turned to face the minister to take their vows.¹

¹Edward Coles to Dolly Madison, November 25, 1833, The Edward Coles Papers, Chicago Historical Society (hereafter CHS). While no direct evidence survives indicating the particular details or location of Coles’s marriage, I have pieced together this description based on my knowledge of the man and the Philadelphia world he inhabited.
It should hardly be surprising that Coles found a bride and got married in Philadelphia. Ever since his year-long sojourn in the city under the care of Dr. Philip S. Physick in 1813, he had felt a strong affection for Philadelphia and its cosmopolitan society. His removal to Illinois and the experience of living in a frontier community had failed to temper those feelings. Indeed, between 1825 and the year of his marriage, Coles spent nearly half of each year east of the Appalachian Mountains, and a significant portion of that time was spent visiting friends in Philadelphia. During these brief, but frequent, visits Coles renewed his friendships with Nicholas Biddle, Robert Vaux, Richard, James, and William Rush and George Mifflin Dallas as well as forged new relationships with John Vaughan, Charles J. Ingersoll, George Cadwalader, George Roberts Smith and Dr. John Chapman, members of Philadelphia’s most prominent social circles. Whenever he returned to the West, he continually craved their company and the polite society that surrounded them.

Even as his political associates in Illinois encouraged him to run for the House of Representatives, Coles could only half-heartedly pursue the position. As the campaign raged around him, Coles remained aloof. In a letter composed to his niece he confessed that any discussion of the City of Brotherly Love provoked feelings that were “impossible to control” because they inevitably led him to “contrast the life I lead here with the one I should lead there.” He also disclosed that, as had been the case on the eve of his immigration westward, the same dilemma still haunted him, for nearly ten years of residence on the frontier and a prominent role in preventing Illinois from becoming a slave state had failed to dampen the conflict he felt between the temptation “to gratify more my
predilection for the enjoyment of society” and his overpowering sense of obligation to engage “more actively in useful and benevolent works.” Although he was “ashamed of [his] . . . inclination to yield to such selfish considerations,” Coles’s experiences in the Prairie State had led him to doubt his ability to serve the cause of humanity, much less succeed at his “herculean scheme of usefulness,” the extinction of the institution of slavery.

As his conflict revealed, Coles spent much of the late 1820s uncertain of how he should or would spend his time. His training at the College of William and Mary and his devotion to freedom and equality demanded that he live a useful life, that he pursue a position of authority that would allow him to ensure the survival of the republican experiment. The political circumstances in Illinois, conditions he had helped to create, however, thwarted his ability to exercise public authority. Without a solid connection to or purpose for being in any particular location, Coles wandered from Illinois to Virginia to Philadelphia, to New York to Saratoga Springs and back to Illinois, traveling this circuit repeatedly over the years until the dazzling character of Sally Logan Roberts, a woman twenty-three years his junior, gave him a reason to settle down.

Little did he know in 1833, but his marriage to Roberts and their decision to reside in Philadelphia ultimately furnished Coles with an opportunity both to satisfy his desire for society while simultaneously fulfilling his deeply-felt sense of duty to be useful to his community. In Philadelphia, Coles encountered a cosmopolitan society populated by elites who believed that individuals who possessed the proper family heritage, displayed the appropriate habits of civility, and claimed a sufficient amount of wealth deserved to
exercise public authority. Coles soon discovered that, like him, Philadelphia’s aristocratic
class felt besieged by the democratic changes occurring around them. In particular, they
disapproved of the emergence of a middle class who increasingly attempted to distinguish
themselves by appropriating and simultaneously transforming American notions of
gentility. Coles and his fellow-elites sought to undermine this assault on their authority by
attending and hosting exclusive social events where they reinforced their own allegiance to
a culture of sociability. By evaluating the habits of civility, sense of fashion, and social
worth of those they encountered at weekly salons, extravagant balls, and private dinners,
Coles and other elite Philadelphians set themselves apart from the vulgar masses and
presumptuous middle class and forged an identity as a national cultural aristocracy.

Although these efforts required most of Philadelphia’s upper crust to shun public
responsibilities and avoid behaving in overtly political ways, the political crisis of the
1850s led men like Coles to conclude that the nation required the wisdom and guidance of
gentlemen of refined sensibility more than ever before. As he observed the increasing
conflicts between the North and the South over the slavery issue and territorial expansion,
Coles became more and more fearful that the republican vision of a prosperous and
harmonious Union first espoused by the founding generation would be destroyed. In
particular, he believed that the extreme positions espoused by both the Northern
abolitionists and Southern state’s right advocates threatened to divide the nation
irrevocably. In an attempt to diffuse the situation, Coles advocated an alternative position
that encouraged the public to pursue a moderate approach to the slavery issue, a position
that advocated the gradual emancipation and eventual colonization of the nation’s
enslaved population.

To accomplish his goal and enhance the attractiveness of his position before the public, Coles represented himself as the authority on the memory of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and the republican legacy and attempted to remind both his intimate circle of friends as well as the broader public that both Jefferson and Madison, as well as the Founders generally, had always believed that slavery was a moral, social, and political evil that must eventually be eradicated. By recasting the founding generation as antislavery statesmen, Coles intended to legitimize his moderate resolution to the political crisis threatening the nation. Accordingly, throughout the late 1840s and 1850s, Coles repeatedly entered the public arena, either anonymously or explicitly, to remind Americans of their responsibility to sustain and fulfill their revolutionary heritage by eliminating the institution of slavery in a way that would not be harmful to the preservation of the Union. Although he admitted that his views contradicted “the present current of opinion in certain parts of our County,” he consoled himself and attempted to inspire the public with the knowledge that “such was the opinion of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, & all the great & good men” of their generation. As he informed South Carolinian Joel R. Poinsette in March 1851, Coles supported and celebrated any “patriotic efforts to lull the blind & reckless passions of the day,” especially if they contributed to the preservation of the Union and ensured that the legacy of the nation’s founding generation passed to posterity intact.²

Within a few days of their marriage, Coles and his new bride departed Philadelphia for a post-nuptial trip to Virginia. As they journeyed to Albemarle County, they stopped in Baltimore and Washington City, where Coles introduced his wife to the broad network of friends he had developed over the previous twenty years. Two weeks after their departure the new couple arrived in Virginia, and Sally Logan Roberts spied her first glimpse of the genteel grandeur of the Coles family seat, Enniscorthy. Coles's mother had passed away seven years earlier, but his older brother Isaac had assumed responsibility for the family estate and his other brothers and sisters continued to live in the region. Like most Southern planter families, the Coles' of Virginia enjoyed a well-deserved reputation for hospitality. Immediately after Edward and Sally arrived at Green Mountain, the family invited their friends to a variety of dinners and intimate parties so Edward could introduce his new wife to some of the most prominent families in the region, the Randolphs, Jeffersons, Cabells, Rives, Tuckers, and Carters among them. Although she was not a Southerner, Sally undoubtedly found the genteel hospitality of her new family comforting in its similarity to her life in Philadelphia.

The Coles' spent nearly a year in Virginia and contemplated extending their trip to Illinois, but the persistence of a cholera epidemic west of the Ohio River as well as the discovery that Sally was pregnant led the newlyweds to return to Philadelphia for her confinement and to experiment with establishing a permanent residence in the city. As Coles informed James Madison in October 1834, his wife was opposed "to being in a Boarding house this winter," preferring instead to rent "a private & comfortable house"
where her mother and sisters could assist her with the birth of her first child. Anxious to
please her, Coles secured a furnished house, “situated high up in Chestnut St. in a pleasant
part of the City.” He confessed that he “gave more than I ought, but it was the only house
with furniture that could be obtained” in the area. Even more importantly, the house was
located in the heart of the city’s fashionable district and would provide them not only with
“an opportunity . . . to try housekeeping in Phila[delphia],” but also to attend the exclusive
social events hosted by the city’s upper class. Despite the advantages of his new
residence, however, Coles continued to doubt whether he had the financial means to
maintain the lifestyle he and Sally craved, or “whether I should be happy with so little to
do.” Yet, after enduring many years of political turmoil and the unpolished and vulgar
character of frontier society in Illinois, he looked forward to a winter of socializing with a
cosmopolitan urban elite, an opportunity, he declared, that would allow him to “devote”
all of his time “to my friends.”

When Coles established his Chestnut Street residence, Philadelphia and the
surrounding suburbs contained over 250,000 residents, quite a different demographic
environment from that which he encountered in the rural frontier town of Edwardsville.
Additionally, unlike his Illinois home, Philadelphia contained a well-developed business
district as well as distinct working-class and aristocratic neighborhoods, all of which
bustled with activity. Although eventually eclipsed by New York whose natural harbor
and banking interests gradually transformed the Empire City into the most important

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3Edward Coles to James Madison October 31, 1834, The Edward Coles Papers, 1786-1868,
Chicago Historical Society (hereafter CHS).
financial center on the eastern seaboard, Philadelphia remained the cultural capital of the nation throughout the nineteenth century.  

Wealthy Philadelphians maintained the city's cultural reputation by hosting exclusive, yet well-publicized, social occasions, events such as balls, dinners, parties, and weekly salons and, as Coles was well-aware because of his earlier residence in and visits to the city, Chestnut Street was located at the heart of this cultural landscape. Not only was it one of the most fashionable streets to stroll down in order to see and be seen, but it was also part of an exclusive neighborhood where many prominent elites made their residence. Throughout the Antebellum era, Philadelphia was the paradigmatic genteel city, renowned for the intellectual and social refinement of its elite residents. Consequently, while Coles's habits of civility, education, genteel background, and extensive national and international political experience had been liabilities that limited, even negated, his public authority in Illinois, those same characteristics marked him as a member of the nation's aristocratic class, an elite group of men and women who continued to believe that sociability, family heritage, and refinement qualified them as cultural leaders in America.

Coles was not the only native Southerner who found Philadelphia and its cosmopolitan environment attractive. Indeed, throughout the first half of the nineteenth

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century, Southerners flocked to the city as they pursued a refined education, a relaxing yet exciting vacation, or a new less-provincial residence. Writing in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, the premier Southern magazine of the era, a North Carolinian boasted that “there is no city in the Union in which the gentleman is better received.” Similarly, another Southern traveler who visited the city in 1834 commented that “Phil[adelphia] is the most genteel place I have seen since I left Charleston.” While cities such as Charleston, Richmond, Baltimore, New York and Boston, contained the libraries, museums, universities, literary societies, and intellectual clubs that defined a city’s urban culture, only Philadelphia, as one British traveler declared, could sustain the “claim [of] being the first in rank in society of any town in the states.”

Despite the city’s reputation as “the best counterpart which America affords of the social refinements of Europe,” Coles and his fellow elite Philadelphians shared a common distrust of and disdain for the emerging democratic political and public culture, a development that increasingly marginalized their place in American society. Throughout his public career in Illinois, Coles’s determination to represent himself as a member of the nation’s natural aristocracy provoked criticism and severely limited his ability to exercise public authority. Even when he attempted to manipulate the emerging democratic ethos

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to achieve the noble goal of preventing the expansion of slavery, Coles found that he
unwittingly contributed to the development of the very cultural characteristics that
undermined his position of influence in society. While many of his fellow-Illinoisans
celebrated his leadership immediately following his gubernatorial term and expressed their
gratitude for his principled opposition to the legalization of slavery, few residents of the
state were willing to support the leadership of a man who staunchly refused to embrace
the democratic political changes he helped to establish. Coles ultimately left Illinois
disillusioned by the political and cultural changes he had witnessed during his tenure on
the frontier and settled in the City of Brotherly Love precisely because Philadelphia’s
social order continued to confer authority on those who possessed a formal education,
habits of sociability, and proper social connections.

To Coles’s disappointment, however, Philadelphia’s wealthy leisure class likewise
felt besieged by the democratizing changes of the post-revolutionary era. From their
perspective, the most visible consequence of the democratization of American society
appeared as the middle class appropriated and redefined upper-class gentility as republican
respectability. After complaining that less-well-to-do residents of the city exhibited a
“low-bred insolence, and a disposition to insult and abuse those who are their superiors in
all . . . respects,” for example, Robert Waln expressed the hope that “the aristocracy of
fashion and gentility would be more clearly recognized, and the farce of relative republican
equality cease to ornament every ragged vagabond with the same attributes as a
gentleman.” Evidence of the changes Waln lamented appeared everywhere. As members
of the upper class strolled through the city, for example, they constantly witnessed and
endured violations of the etiquette rules that had governed social relations and
distinguished the better-sort from the rest of society throughout the Colonial and Early
National periods. Jane North, a native North Carolinian, described Chestnut Street as
“very handsome,” but confessed that her afternoon stroll was marred when “one little
miserable . . . boy rushed against me, & before I recovered the shock, had torn the lace of
my defenseless mantilla.”* 

Coles experienced similarly discouraging behavior firsthand. In the winter of
1837, Coles eagerly anticipated moving into a new home he purchased on Girard Street,
but complained to Dolley Madison that “the delinquent & faithless mechanicks of this
good City” had unconsciously conspired to thwart his plans. Over the previous two years
he had rented furnished accommodations, and, as a result, had to commission the
construction of new furniture and acquire the essential housewares for his new home.
“[T]he want of punctuality & bad treatment of the different mechanicks we have
employed,” he proclaimed, “kept him going & sending in the most . . . provoking manner”

*Peter Atall [Robert Waln, Jr.], The Hermit in Philadelphia, Second Series. Containing Some
Account of Young Belles and Coquettes; Elegantes and Spoiled Children; Dandies and Ruffians; Old
Maids and Old Bachelors; Dandy-Slang; Morning Visits and Evening Parties; Dress and Ornaments;
Female Sladerers and Male Exquisites; Long Branch Letters and Prices Current; Lotteries and Quacks;
Billiards and Pharo; Gambling and Sporting; Elections and Amusements; Theatricals and Horse Racing;
Wife Selling and Betting; Boxing and Cocking; Dog Fighting and Bull Baiting, &c. &c., &c.
(Philadelphia: J. Maxwell and Moses Thomas, 1821), 78-79; Jane Caroline North Diary, August, 20,
1850, in An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South, edited by Michael
deference, middle-class culture, and the public performance of authority, see Karen Halttunen, Confidence
Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale
University Press, 1982); Stuart M. Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the
American City, 1760-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Richard L. Bushman, The
making him feel more degraded and humiliated with each passing day. Coles left Illinois to escape the rude and disrespectful behavior of frontier society only to encounter it in Philadelphia.

Coles and his fellow besieged elites attempted to undermine the democratic assault on aristocracy by constructing a national elite identity based on sociability, refinement, family heritage, and, to a lesser degree, wealth. As the emerging middle class transformed the meaning of American gentility to include any individual who displayed the proper character and manners, the nation’s urban elites continually sought to distinguish between those who genuinely possessed a refined character from those who merely mastered the public presentation of polite manners and sociability. To that end, upper-class Philadelphians, and indeed elites in most eastern cities, established an exclusive social culture of extravagant balls, weekly salons, and private societies where they constantly evaluated the fashionable dress and habits of civility of those they encountered. While they certainly conceded that a truly republican society meant that “none are excluded from the highest councils of the nation,” Philadelphia’s ruling elite continued to believe that the democratization of American society should “not [mean] . . . that all can enter into the highest ranks of society.”


Few Philadelphians would have doubted Coles's place among the city's upper class, for he certainly boasted all the characteristics of a refined gentleman. He had acquired the habits of civility and mastered the art of sociability while a student at the College of William and Mary and refined those skills during his tenure as James Madison's private secretary. He recognized the importance of fashionable dress as well as refined manners and deportment and never failed to display his commitment to the art of politeness when in public. As his experiences in Washington City, abroad and on the frontier had demonstrated, an individual's demeanor and public display of character defined his status and shaped his claim to authority within his community as much as family name and material wealth. While these characteristics had become a distinct disadvantage on the frontier, where the cosmopolitan culture that elevated individuals of refinement and education had yet to develop, Coles's refined manner easily identified him as a cultural leader along the Atlantic seaboard.

When he married Sally Logan Roberts, Coles immediately enhanced his credibility among the Philadelphia elite. While they recognized that he was from a prominent Virginia family, the social leaders of Philadelphia's aristocratic class also embraced Coles as one of their own because he had joined one of the city's oldest and most prominent families. His wife's great grandfather was Hugh Roberts of Wales, a man of royal decent and a Quaker who immigrated to America with William Penn in the 1680s. Sally's father maintained the family's status in the city by establishing a lucrative iron business. Throughout the Early National and Antebellum eras, nearly every Philadelphia social and cultural institution listed a Roberts as a member. Even more importantly, by marrying Sally Logan Roberts,
Coles became part of an extensive, yet exclusive, social network that included Phoebe Rush, the famed Philadelphia hostess who was known for her lavish weekly salons and extravagant annual balls. Coles, then, boasted the family connections necessary to be recognized immediately as a member of Philadelphia’s aristocratic class.

Although less important to most Philadelphia elites than family heritage, Coles also possessed substantial personal wealth. Unlike most elite Southerners in Philadelphia whose wealth was based on large-scale agricultural production, the traditional foundation of aristocratic status, Coles generated his income and financed his leisure activities through a variety of capital investments. Nearly twenty years before he established his residence in Philadelphia, Coles’s brothers and sisters had warned him that if he liberated his enslaved property he would sacrifice the most valuable portion of his inheritance and, thereby, destroy his ability to live as a gentleman. Fully aware of the economic consequences of his commitment to emancipation, Coles had attempted to prevent his financial ruin by investing in western land, purchasing bank and railroad stock, and loaning cash to enterprising farmers and merchants. Throughout his residence in Philadelphia, Coles enjoyed the benefits of this successful investment strategy. While the average farmer or laborer rarely earned more than between two hundred and fifty to five hundred dollars annually, Coles earned a yearly income that fluctuated between eight and seventeen

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12 Edward Coles, “Autobiography,” April 1844, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.

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thousand dollars. 13 Ironically, by the last half of his life, Coles resembled the eastern capitalists favored by Alexander Hamilton more than the virtuous independent western agriculturalist celebrated by his mentor, Thomas Jefferson.

To prevent the disintegration of the essential distinction between the upper crust and the vulgar masses, Coles and his fellow elites carefully monitored who participated in polite society. A North Carolinian who contributed several articles to the Southern Literary Messenger, for example, acknowledged that "It has been said that the Philadelphians are cold and reserved in their intercourse with strangers," but assured his audience that anyone "who bring[s] letters of introduction, or persons whose family, education, and manners are such as to entitle them to move in their circles will, when acquainted with them, have the most marked attention paid them." Significantly, the characteristics elites employed to determine who to admit or exclude from their polite society had little to do with regional affiliation and, instead, reflected their cross-sectional concern for class. By restricting access to their social events to those who shared a common class identity, Philadelphia's urban elite established the boundaries of acceptable behavior and projected a national cultural ideal they expected others to respect and hoped

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would protect their claim to public authority.

Coles contributed and perpetuated upper-class exclusivity by joining some of the city’s most prestigious institutions. He was, for example, a member of the American Philosophical Society and an intimate friend of that organization’s president, John Vaughan. More than any other institution in Philadelphia, the American Philosophical Society sought to create a cosmopolitan community of gentlemen who shared a common commitment to learning and sociability. To that end, Vaughan recruited members from all over the nation, often ignoring political and sectional divisions. He also sought to introduce men of learning and other worthy visitors into the city’s genteel social circles by hosting regular breakfasts and encouraging members to host weekly evening parties.

In the winter of 1840, Coles assumed responsibility for hosting one of the Society’s weekly gatherings. “I am so kindly invited to so many of the Wistar and other parties,” declared Coles, “that I feel constrained every year or two to give one of those kinds of parties.” Named for Dr. Caspar Wistar, who always opened his house “to men of learning, both citizens and strangers,” the American Philosophical Society’s Wistar Parties were hosted by members on a rotating basis and generally restricted to between fifteen and twenty-five guests. Coles proudly boasted that “on Thursday evening last, I had my rooms full of very pleasant people,” undoubtedly men such as William Short, Joseph Hopkinson, Nathaniel Chapman, Jared Sparks, Robley Dungilson, Hugh Blair Grigsby, George Cadwalader, and the Biddles, all of whom regularly attended these gatherings. As one observer testified, the Wistar parties ensured that all those who attended would be “acquainted . . . with the worth, wit and learning of Philadelphia.” Likewise, Coles and his
fellow-elites intended the gatherings to reinforce their membership among the city’s upper crust as well as their public authority as cultural leaders in the city and the nation as a whole. ¹⁴

Coles also belonged to the Athenaeum, an exclusive library that furnished “a place of resort for persons of leisure who may wish to read the newspapers, reviews, and scientific journals.” Like the American Philosophical Society, the Athenaeum was an exclusive intellectual and social club that prohibited strangers from entering its halls unless “introduced by subscribers or stockholders.” As a stockholder, Coles could admit prominent visitors, and his fellow-elites implicitly trusted that he would distinguish between a true gentleman and a pretender, for admitting a stranger beyond the doors of the Athenaeum not only provided them with access to the periodicals housed in the building, but also conferred acceptance into the city’s exclusive social circle as well.

Recognizing her brother’s place in Philadelphia society, Coles’s sister, Sally Coles Stevenson, requested that he seek the acquaintance of Patrick Murray, “the nephew of Sir Geo: Murray, . . . and extend yr kindness and civility in making Philadelphia agreeable to him.” To accomplish the task, she recommended that Coles “make him acquainted with all your friends, [but] particularly Mr. Short, Dr. Chapman, and other” members of the American Philosophical Society and Athenaeum. As an accepted member of the Philadelphia’s aristocratic class, Coles could endorse or reject anyone who sought the

authority that accompanied acceptance in the city's elite social circle.¹⁵

When Coles moved to Philadelphia, then, he joined a cosmopolitan urban
community of elites that was particularly conservative, and even reactionary, in its world
view. Disheartened and disgusted by the erosion of their authority, Coles and his fellow-
elites attempted to preserve their prestige and influence by forging a cross-sectional
aristocratic identity that celebrated family heritage, sociability, and refinement. By
retreating to the privacy of their parlors, salons, and exclusive societies, these elites voiced
their disapproval of the democratization of America's social and political culture. From
their perspective, the former was most visible in the middle-class redefinition of gentility as
respectability, while the latter could be recognized as the vulgar pursuit of office by
professional politicians. The political crisis of the 1850s, however, led many Philadelphia
elites to conclude that the nation needed their guidance more than ever before. Rather
than pursue public office, however, Coles and many of his supporters sought to shape the
direction of national sentiment on the slavery issue from their parlors and society meeting
rooms, a fatefuly flawed strategy.

As he entered the public debate on slavery, Coles discovered that he faced a
potentially hostile audience among his aristocratic peers in Philadelphia. To be sure,
Philadelphia exhibited a particularly pro-Southern environment that embraced men like
Coles. Like their Southern counterparts, the members of Philadelphia's upper class
believed in the cultural and social importance of refined sociability and the inherent value

¹⁵Sally Coles Stevenson to Edward Coles, January 18, 1838, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.
Coles's sister was married to Andrew Stevenson, the American Minister in London from 1836 to 1841.

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of promoting the leadership of a natural aristocracy. For many Philadelphians, then, the Southern planter class represented an ideal worth emulating and welcomed any opportunity to forge associations with men and women from the South. Whether they associated with the South Carolinians who made Spruce Street famous for its intellectual and cultural gatherings during the early nineteenth century or vacationed with the cream of the Southern gentry at the resorts in Saratoga Springs, Newport, Rhode Island and Schooley’s Mountain in New Jersey, Philadelphia’s elite shared a commitment to leisure, hospitality, and honor that resulted in a cross-sectional class identity that belied the sectional divisions emerging during the 1850s.¹⁶

To Coles’s dismay, however, the common bonds forged by their shared commitment to refinement and sociability also meant that Philadelphia’s wealthier residents rarely criticized Southerners who owned bound laborers. Instead, like many Southerners, they too believed that slavery was an important and essential component of a natural hierarchy that ensured the stability of the social order. While many of them opposed the geographic expansion of the institution, most Philadelphia gentlefolk believed the institution should remain unchallenged where it already existed. Many elite Philadelphians, then, shared most Southerners’s distrust of radical abolitionists of the Garrisonian school, preferring to promote a more conservative middle ground on the issue. As Charles Godfrey Leland observed “everything Southern was exalted an

worshiped" by wealthy Philadelphians. "There was hardly a soul whom I knew," he
continued, "to whom an Abolitionist was not simply the same thing as a disgraceful,
discreditable malefactor."17

Similarly, Coles found that, unlike him, Southerners and Northerners alike were
comforted by the city’s formal and informal racial codes that severely restricted free
blacks’s civil liberties even as they established a vibrant community culture of their own.
While they were discouraged by the regular appearance of “a beautiful young Quaker lady
escorted in the streets by some of the coloured beaux” and expressed disgust upon
learning that some abolitionists attended weddings where “the whites & blacks mingled
promiscuously,” most Southern-born residents and visitors recognized that such behavior
was more the exception than the rule. Instead, the city’s wealthier residents would have
agreed with Frederick Douglass when he observed that “[I]here is not perhaps anywhere
to be found a city in which prejudice against color is more rampant than in Philadelphia.”

As one Southern student informed his parents, “I tell you they make the free negroes walk
a straight line” in this city. Together, the desire of Philadelphia’s upper crust to preserve
the social order from the threats of both radical abolitionists and upstart free blacks
created a comfortable, even enticing, environment for many Southerners who journeyed
northward.18


18David Hamilton to Sarah Hamilton, December 31, 1837; Douglass’ Monthly, February, 1862;
and Marmaduke Kimbaugh to Nathaniel Hunt, December 17, 1858, cited in Kilbride, “The Cosmopolitan
South,” Journal of Urban History 26 (July 2000), 566 and Kilbride, “Southern Medical Students in
race relations in the North, see John Hope Franklin, A Southern Odyssey: Travelers in the Antebellum
North (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976). On free black community development in
Coles attempted to take advantage of the cross-sectional bonds that already existed among genteel Northerners and Southerners to create a coalition of moderate Unionists who could counter the destructive potential of the abolitionists and the state’s rights advocates. To that end, he offered gradual emancipation and colonization as an alternative solution to the conflicts of the 1850s. More importantly, he sought to legitimize his strategy by associating the views he represented with the founding generation and the revolutionary legacy. Consequently, Coles, who claimed to have learned “the precepts of Democratic Truth and liberty . . . at the feet of Thomas Jefferson” and who had developed an intimate relationship with James Madison while serving as his private secretary, designated himself to be the authority on Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and the appropriate meaning of their republican legacy. As he confessed to a fellow Pennsylvanian, “there are few, if any, [men other than himself] now alive who have enjoyed so extensively and intimately, the acquaintance, and had more familiar opportunities of conversing and knowing the opinions of the distinguished men who have adorned our country.”

Coles’s assessment of his own importance in this enterprise was buttressed by several of his contemporaries. B. W. Richards, president of the Free Soil Convention at Reading in Pennsylvania, turned to Coles in the fall of 1848 for “the words of experience and truth in relation to the original views of the great republican leaders and founders of Philadelphia, see Gary B. Nash, Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community, 1720-1840 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).


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our government.” Similarly, Hugh Blair Grigsby informed Henry S. Randall, who was writing a biography of Jefferson during the 1850s, that few men other than Coles could provide more “useful information in filling up your outline of the personnel and the morale of Mr. Jefferson.” William Cabell Rives, who had been commissioned by the Virginia Historical Society to write a biography of James Madison in 1855, likewise confessed to Coles that “there is [no] one, my dear sir, to whom I can appeal, with more confidence in both the accuracy of his information & disposition to impart it, than yourself.”

Coles was not the only American who attempted to associate the founding generation with the sanctity of the Union during the debate over slavery and westward expansion. “We can win no laurels in a war for independence,” proclaimed Daniel Webster. “Earlier and worthier hands have gathered them all . . . . But there remains to us,” he continued, “a great duty of deference and preservation.” Similarly, Abraham Lincoln disclosed that “It was the duty of this generation . . . to preserve those institutions and transmit them undecayed to the next generation.” After 1830, however, partisan and sectional divisions increasingly threatened the ability of those who exercised political authority to fulfill their duty. Yet, at least one anonymous author confidently predicted that “if the occasion demanded, the sons of the sages and heroes of the revolution would

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shew that the sprit of the fathers still lingered, and only required the kindling spark of kindred circumstances" to demonstrate their determination to venerate and preserve the legacy of the nation’s founders.²¹

Like Coles, many of the nation’s political leaders felt obliged to maintain, protect, and perpetuate the accomplishments of the Founding Fathers and attempted to celebrate their legacy as a way of reminding the public of the importance of the Union. “Divisions may spring up, ill blood may burn, parties be formed, and interests may seem to clash,” declared Edward Everett, “but the great bonds of the nation are linked to what is past. The deeds of the great men, to whom this country owes its origin and growth,” he continued, “are a patrimony, I know, of which its children will never deprive themselves.” Another anonymous author proclaimed that “Americans might, to be sure ‘have their sectional loves and hatreds, but before the dear name of Washington, they are absorbed and forgotten.’” Similarly, Henry T. Tuckerman assured his audience that “the fanaticism of party strife has awakened the wise and loyal to a consciousness of the inestimable value of that great example and canonized name [Washington], as a bond of union, a conciliating memory, and a glorious watchword.”²²


Yet, unlike many of his fellow-Unionists, Coles pursued a strategy that offered gradual emancipation and colonization as an alternative and explicitly sought to legitimize his approach to the crisis of the 1850s by claiming that Jefferson and the Founders would have approved of such a path to ensure the preservation of their republican experiment. In many ways, the political turmoil that threatened to divide the nation irrevocably offered Coles an opportunity to combine the two commitments that had defined his life-experiences for the first time. By promoting gradual emancipation and colonization, he could simultaneously fulfill his generational obligation, first assumed while a student in Williamsburg, to work on behalf of the preservation of the Union and satisfy his heart-felt commitment to oppose the institution of slavery. To do this, however, he had to recast both Jefferson and Madison, as well as the founding generation generally, as antislavery statesmen, an ironic development given his fairly consistent criticism of both his mentors for failing to liberate their own chattel property. But, his own experiences in Illinois as well as his life-long interaction with similarly-minded conservative Unionists, led Coles to abandon the impatient idealistic objections to gradual emancipation and colonization he first expressed during his youth. Instead, by the 1840s a lifetime of experience led Coles to pursue the pragmatic approach to the slavery issue first voiced by Jefferson and Madison and redefine his new position as sufficiently antislavery to warrant national support.

Most colonizationists deplored slavery and blamed the institution for the economic and social evils they perceived in Southern society. In an anonymous editorial published in 

*Patricide in a House Divided*, 164 and 186.

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the *Richmond Enquirer*, one Virginia resident proclaimed “that slavery, that inert mass of our population, is one great cause of all our misfortunes: for that is the dead weight which mars all enterprise, and clogs the wheels of our political machine. . . . [I]f Virginia could, by any means,” he continued, “exchange the whole number of her blacks for only one half the number of whites, she would then” improve economically and compete more ably with the Northern states. Additionally, colonizationists generally believed that the prevalence of anti-black prejudice among whites formed an insurmountable barrier against equality among the races. From their perspective, only a program of gradual abolition coupled with the removal of the free black population would eliminate the obstacles that had prevented Southern support for abolition and, therefore, offered the best resolution to the problem of slavery.\(^{23}\)

The emergence of the abolition movement in the early 1830s essentially halted the growing popularity of the colonization movement. William Lloyd Garrison, who had initially embraced colonization as a remedy, denounced the movement in his 1832 publication *Thoughts on African Colonization*. He charged that colonization was part of a proslavery conspiracy to rid the nation of its free black population and protect and

strengthen the institution of slavery where it already existed. The fundamental difference between the Garrisonians and the colonizationists was their divergent views of the capacity of whites to live peacefully with blacks. The abolitionists believed that slavery was a sin and that slaveholders should repent by immediately emancipating their enslaved property. Additionally, they maintained that every individual, white or black, possessed the capacity for self-improvement. Consequently, they maintained that whites could overcome their prejudices toward blacks and free people of color could rise above the degradation imposed on them by years of enslavement. The end result, they predicted, would be a racially egalitarian society. To discredit their opponents, the abolitionists labeled any colonization program as impractical and based on an intense prejudice toward blacks. They also celebrated their own faith in the ability of free blacks to improve themselves and, by setting a good example, diminish white antipathy toward all blacks.24

Initially, Coles shared many of the assumptions expressed by post-1830 abolitionists. He ignored Thomas Jefferson’s advice urging him to pursue a pragmatic approach to the problem by retaining his enslaved property and remaining in Virginia. Instead, he emigrated to Illinois and free soil where he could immediately emancipate his bound laborers. As he described the scene of emancipation many years later, Coles recalled that he had instructed “them to be honest and industrious; to be moral in their conduct, correct in their behavior, and in a word so to deport themselves as to acquire a

good character.” The purpose of his advice, he revealed, was to allow their good example to show that the black race were not inferior to the white, and were equally qualified to enjoy all the blessings, and perform all the duties, incident to freedom.” To aid them in their task, Coles employed some of them on his own farm and paid them wages, gave land to each head of household, and encouraged the children to learn to read and write.25

A variety of circumstances, however, eroded the idealism that inspired Coles to conduct his experiment in black freedom. Several of the ex-slaves encountered the bitter prejudice of their white neighbors and were prevented from earning a wage sufficient enough to support themselves or their families. Consequently, to ensure their success, Coles maintained a paternalistic relationship with many of them by providing each individual with both financial and medical support. Coles also witnessed firsthand the breadth and strength of anti-black prejudice among the residents of Illinois during the convention contest of 1822-1824. Only by addressing and manipulating white Illinoisans’s fears of an increasing black population could Coles and the anti-conventionists successfully convince the electorate to vote against legalizing slavery in their state. Additionally, Coles endured the antipathy and persecution of his neighbors and political enemies throughout the early 1820s as they sought to damage his standing among his peers by criticizing his decision to emancipate his slaves. As Jefferson had warned him in 1814, “the idea of emancipating the whole at once, the old as well as the young, and retaining them here, is of those who have not the guide of either knowledge or experience

25“A Sketch of the Emancipation, As Told by Him,” October 1827, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. For a fuller discussion of the emancipation and his experience in Illinois, see Chapter 4.
of the subject.”

Once he acquired the “knowledge” and “experience” his mentor spoke of, Coles concluded that immediate emancipation harbored more dangers than benefits. As he confessed in October 1827, his experiences in Illinois, as well as his long-held belief “in the practicability of the removal of the blacks,” had induced him to encourage the enslaved laborers he emancipated to immigrate to Africa. He even offered “to go with them, & to assist them with any pecuniary” demands necessary to accomplish their journey. To his dismay, the ex-slaves were “so happy & content where they are, that they seem reluctant to change their situation.” Still, he hoped that they would change their minds and frequently provided them with information on Africa and the colony in Liberia. Significantly, from Coles’s perspective, his decision to support colonization hardly constituted a betrayal of his antislavery ideals; for he never abandoned his commitment to emancipation and the eradication of slavery. Instead, he claimed that his experiences in Illinois led him to advocate a different method of accomplishing the same goal.26

Throughout his post-Illinois career, Coles consistently advocated gradual emancipation and colonization as the only responsible and potentially successful means of eliminating slavery. When Virginia’s political leadership engaged in a debate over slavery between 1829 and 1832, Coles paid particularly close attention to the convention and legislative proceedings of those years and attempted to influence the outcome of the

26 Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, August 25, 1814, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU; Coles, “Sketch of the Emancipation of the Slaves of Edward Coles, As Told by Him,” Edward Coles Collection, HSP. For a fuller discussion of the experiences of both Coles and his ex-slaves, see Chapter 4. For the characterization of the colonization movement as antislavery, see Frederickson, Black Image in the White Mind, 1-21 and Alison Goodyear Freehling, Drift Toward Disunion: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-32 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 99-106.
debates. During the winter of 1829-1830, for example, Coles penned a letter addressed to James Monroe, who served as president of the constitutional convention then meeting in Richmond, and submitted it for publication in the *Richmond Enquirer*. Concealed behind the pseudonym "Jefferson," Coles expressed his shock and dismay over the ex-president's remarks on emancipation. Specifically, he chastised Monroe for failing to take "a more enlarged view of" the emancipation issue and for contenting "yourself with deprecating the effects of immediate emancipation" while simultaneously suggesting that the removal of the state's free black population "is impossible." "I had not believed the most enthusiastic friend of emancipation," declared Coles, "ever entertained the idea of an immediate liberation of them." As proof of his assertion, he reminded Monroe that Thomas Jefferson had suggested a gradual emancipation program coupled with colonization "more than 40 years ago" and expressed his regret that Monroe had not capitalized on such a precedent when faced with the opportunity to do so.27

Coles then proposed a program of gradual emancipation and colonization that "would not cost the Commonwealth, or its white citizens, one dollar." He recommended that masters emancipate the children of their slaves when they reached the age of twenty-one, a sufficient period of time to "repay the master of the parents the expenses of his rearing." He then suggested that the newly freed blacks remain in their master's employ for two or three years, enough time he assured his audience, for the individual to earn the...

27"For the Richmond Enquirer: To James Monroe, President of the Convention, signed Jefferson," Commonplace Book, Volume VII, 81, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. At both the beginning and end of the article, where Jefferson appeared, Coles wrote in his own hand "Ed. Coles," indicating that he authored the piece.
money to pay for his transportation across the Atlantic. If Europe’s poor white inhabitants could fund their journey to America by laboring for a designated number of years, asked Coles, then “what difficulty can there be in removing across the same ocean the poor blacks of Virginia, after they have acquired by their labour, the means of making prompt payment for their removal.” By publically linking his scheme to the ideas Jefferson first expressed in 1782 and by suggesting that the document came from the spirit of Jefferson himself, Coles intended to employ his mentor’s authority to increase the merits and potential acceptability of his program.

Less than two years later, Coles wrote Jefferson’s grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, who was serving his first term in the Virginia state legislature, imploring him to impress upon his fellow delegates the “absolute necessity of commencing a course for the” abolition of slavery and removal of the state’s free blacks. Citing “the existing crisis” precipitated by Nat Turner’s rebellion, Coles reminded Randolph, by paraphrasing Jefferson, “That it [slavery] must & will terminate, either by the consent of the Master or resistance of the slave.” To avoid the latter, Coles instructed Randolph, who he was “gratified to find . . . had inherited the feelings & principles” of his renown grandfather, to introduce an emancipation program that would provide for the gradual abolition of slavery and the colonization of the newly freed blacks outside of the state.

Although he recognized that they had discussed the subject on many occasions,

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28Ibid.

29Edward Coles to Thomas Jefferson Randolph, December 29, 1831, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.
Coles presented Randolph with “what I think ought to be done at the present Session of the Legislature.” Unlike the proposal published in the Richmond Enquirer a few years earlier, Coles recommended that the state impose “a small capitation tax . . . on the coloured population, free & slave,” as a means of generating a fund to finance the removal of Virginia's free black residents. He then repeated the proposal he advocated earlier, suggesting that every child born after a specific date, and he suggested January 1, 1840, should be emancipated when they reached the age of twenty-one. Furthermore, he recommended that every individual freed in this way “should be held to labour . . . until it should have acquired from its labour a sufficient sum to pay for its transportation to Africa.” He assured his correspondent that the gradual nature of the program “would almost imperceptibly withdraw the Slaves & substitute free labourers in their places.” Additionally, by designating such a remote date for the emancipation of the first enslaved individual, the measure would become “more acceptable to the present proprietors of Slaves.” Coincidentally, Coles’s proposed emancipation program would liberate the first of Virginia’s enslaved laborers in 1863, the same year Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.30

Within a month of receiving Coles’s letter, Randolph submitted a gradual emancipation program to the state legislature and provoked Virginia’s most extensive public debate to date regarding abolition. He proposed that all slave children born “on or after the 4th of July, 1840” should become the property of the state, the men at the age of twenty-one and the women at eighteen years of age. Furthermore, the state should hire

30Ibid.
them “out until the nett sum arising therefrom, shall be sufficient to defray the expense of their removal.” Like Coles, then, Randolph sought to resolve the pecuniary problem consistently associated with emancipation and colonization by assuring his audience that the bound laborers would pay for both their freedom and transportation out of the country. Unlike Coles, however, he acknowledged that some slaveowners would probably prefer to sell their slaves to the Deep South prior to the date of their emancipation and, thereby, avoid setting at liberty their chattel property. Randolph celebrated this possibility as an alternative means for slaveowners to generate a monetary compensation for the loss of their laborers. Regardless of the option chosen by Virginia’s slaveholders, Randolph boasted that his program would ensure that the “African will pass away from the wasted lands of Virginia, and from a people whose only curse was to have him thrust upon them.”

While he was surely gratified that Randolph had followed his advice, Coles probably was disappointed that the tone of Randolph’s antislavery appeal failed to exhibit the commitment to liberty and universal freedom he associated with Jefferson. From his perspective, Randolph had failed to live up to his grandfather’s revolutionary principles when he sought to generate support for his program by creating a loophole that permitted avaricious slaveholders to condemn countless enslaved laborers to the harsh conditions of perpetual bondage in the Deep South rather than grant them freedom across the Atlantic.

Still, to Coles's dismay, the committee appointed to consider Randolph's resolution issued a report declaring that it was inexpedient to pursue any legislative action on slavery. When faced with the opportunity, then, Virginians, like Illinoisans in the 1820s, had failed to take the lead on the slavery issue, choosing instead to maintain the status quo.32

Convinced that Virginians, and Southerners generally, would embrace gradual emancipation and colonization if they had a prominent example to follow, Coles yet again turned to another revolutionary leader, but this time to Madison, a member of the Virginia Colonization Society, hoping the aged ex-president would personally implement the plan Coles first presented in his published letter to James Monroe. Reflecting on his visit to Montpelier and the long conversation he had with his mentor in the summer of 1831 regarding the disposition of the ex-president's slaves, Coles declared that "it would be a blot & stigma on your otherwise spotless escutcheon, not to restore to your slaves that liberty and those rights which you have been through life so zealous & able a champion." Acknowledging Madison's hesitation as a result of the "difficulty in their emancipation, subsequent support, & transportation out of the Country," Coles warned his mentor that "the example of your countenancing, & as far as you can of perpetuating the bondage of so many unfortunate human beings" will only increase over time the obstacles that led to his reluctance. Worse still, Madison's inaction, and the consequent apathy of others, would result in an increase in the black population, a circumstance, Coles predicted, that

32Freehling, Drift Toward Disunion, 135-48; Iaccarino, "Virginia and the National Debate Over Slavery," 202-03; Shade, Democratizing the Old Dominion, 203.
was sure to lead to violence between the races.  

Persuaded that it was "impossible for the two races ever to live harmoniously together," Coles recommended that Madison pursue a plan of emancipation that "will redound to your fame & may be calculated to induce others to follow your example." To that end, he suggested that Madison stipulate in his will that all of his enslaved laborers below a certain age be set at liberty after a specific number of years. The date of emancipation, he continued, should be determined by the obligations of the estate (debts and support required by his widow), as well as "the necessity of retaining the slaves in service until they should have acquired by their labour the means of transporting themselves to Africa." As far as those bound laborers who had intermarried with neighboring slaves, he proposed that the executors of the estate negotiate exchanges that would allow them to travel abroad together. Where such an arrangement was impossible, Coles concluded, the slave "would have to choose between the natural love of liberty and the endearing ties of family."  

Confident that he had convinced Madison to follow his advice, Coles never mentioned the subject to his mentor again. To his shock and dismay four years later, however, Madison failed to emancipate any of his slaves in his will. Exactly one month after Madison's death, Coles wrote his sister exclaiming "His (Mr. Madison's) slaves not emancipated! For this Mr. S[tevenson, Coles's brother-in-law,] will have much to

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33Edward Coles to James Madison, January 8, 1832, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU. See also Coles, "Autobiography," April 1844, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.

34Ibid.
answer.” Coles believed that Andrew Stevenson, who visited Madison soon after Coles in 1831, had “presented such representations & made such difficulties . . . as to make him doubt of the utility of the contemplated provision.” Angered by his brother-in-law’s interference, Coles accused him of “defacing his [Madison’s] character with its greatest if not only stain.” Four months later, Coles informed his sister that the spreading news of Madison’s failure to emancipate his slaves and the resulting burden his enslaved property imposed on his widow had encouraged slave traders to visit Montpelier regularly. “It was like a hawk among the pigeons,” he observed. As the traders appeared at the plantation, “the poor creatures wd run to the house & protest agt being sold,” claiming that their deceased master had promised that none of them would be sold without their consent.

Coles witnessed the sale of a woman and two children during an August 1836 visit and concluded that “Mr. Madison’s course has been unfortunate for his memory.” Perhaps more significant for him, Madison’s inaction and the subsequent sale of some of his chattel property deprived Coles of the valuable example he required to lend authority and legitimacy to the colonization movement.35

35Edward Coles to Sally Stevenson, July 28 and November 12, 1836, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU. Despite this setback, Coles continued to profess his commitment to colonization. In the autobiography he composed in April 1844, Coles confessed that he “was among the first to advocate the establishment of a Colony on the coast of Africa.” Although the enslaved laborers he liberated “have succeeded well, enjoyed their freedom, & led happy lived,” he declared, he still believed they would be happier and better off if they “removed to a country exclusively occupied by the people of their own colour.” More than anything, Coles’s observations of and confrontation with white prejudice in Illinois sustained his determination to promote colonization. “Races of men that differ so much in appearance as the White & Black man,” he concluded, “will never . . . associate as equals, & live in harmony & social intercourse.” Such a prospect was even more unlikely, he continued, “when one of these races has . . . been held in bondage & looked upon as a degraded race by the other.” Intimately familiar with the “disadvantages & indignities” his ex-slaves regularly endured, Coles repeatedly encouraged them to emigrate across the Atlantic. He even offered to pay for Robert Crawford, a prosperous farmer and minister, to journey to Liberia. Coles hoped that Crawford would “write a full & faithful account” of the colony that could be published “for the information of his black brethren generally.” But, like many free
Just as he sought to legitimize post-natı emancipation and colonization by linking them with the authority of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, so too did Coles attempt to strengthen the position of the Unionists as they struggled to resolve conflicts over slavery after 1830. Coles encountered his first opportunity to employ his authority as a guardian of Jefferson’s views when Congress received several petitions demanding the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia in the winter of 1836. John C. Calhoun epitomized the Southern response to the abolition petitions when he declared that “Congress had no jurisdiction on the subject, no more in the District than in the State of South Carolina; it was a question,” he continued, “not to be touched by Congress.” He proposed, therefore, that Congress reject any antislavery petitions submitted for consideration. Unwilling to follow Calhoun’s lead, Congress rejected his recommendation and pursued a compromise. Several weeks later, Henry L. Pinckney, another South Carolinian, suggested sending every petition regarding slavery in the nation’s capital to a committee “with instructions to report that Congress possesses no constitutional authority to interfere in any way with the institution of slavery in any of the states of his confederacy.” Furthermore, Pinckney recommended that the committee state that Congress should not interfere with slavery in the nation’s capital because “it would be a violation of the public faith, unwise, impolitic, and dangerous to the Union.” At the same time, blacks in America, Crawford consistently refused to leave the United States. As he informed Coles, Crawford was “so fully engrossed & happily occupied in attending to his Family, his Farm, & his Congregation,” that he had no desire to leave Illinois. See Coles, “Autobiography,” April 1844, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. Coles continued to support colonization despite the refusal of his ex-slaves to immigrate to Africa. He not only raised funds for the cause, but, between 1840 and his death in 1868, he also served as the director of the American Colonization Society in Philadelphia. See Commonplace Book, Volume VII, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. See also McCoy, The Last of the Fathers, 316-17.
time Martin Van Buren, who was a candidate for the presidency, publicly acknowledged that he believed Congress should not interfere with slavery in the District.\textsuperscript{36}

From Coles’s perspective, the unwillingness of Congress and Van Buren to acknowledge the constitutional authority of the government to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia resulted from an ignorance of or blindness toward “historical facts.” In a letter addressed to the editors of the \textit{National Intelligencer}, Coles declared “that Congress would not only conceive itself possessed of the power, but that it would exercise it, and even before this have abolished slavery.” As proof of his assertion, Coles argued that the land cessions to the Federal government by Virginia and various other states, as well as the land ordinance of 1785, bequeathed to Congress the power to regulate the institutions established in those regions. More importantly, he claimed that the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which he maintained was authored by Thomas Jefferson, prohibited slavery north of the Ohio River, and was, therefore, an example of Congress exercising the powers equivalent to abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia. Despite his effort to remind the nation’s political leaders of the historical precedents that supported the abolition of slavery in Washington, the institution remained a constant feature in the

\textsuperscript{36}Register of Debates, 24\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, January 7, 1836, 7: 74; Martin Van Buren, \textit{Opinions of Martin Van Buren, Vice President of the United States, upon the Powers and Duties of Congress, in Reference to the Abolition of Slavery Either in the Slave-Holding States or in the District of Columbia} (Washington, D.C.: Blair & Rives, 1836). Pinckney’s resolution was referred to a committee populated with members who favored the spirit of the compromise. Nearly three months later, Congress accepted the committee’s report which essentially recommended that every petition received regarding slavery be tabled without being read or commented upon by the members. The resulting gag rule remained in effect for nearly ten years, and as it had throughout the early 1800s, Congress indefinitely delayed any resolution of the slavery issue in the nation’s capital and refused to declare conclusively whether or not Congress possessed the constitutional authority to act against the institution. See Register of Debates, 24\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, February 4, 1836, 7: 2482-83. See also Fehrenbacker, \textit{The Slaveholding Republic}, 74-79.
nation's capital throughout the Antebellum era.\textsuperscript{37}

The power of Congress to legislate on slavery and a firm commitment to gradual emancipation and colonization became the central components of Coles's political creed throughout the 1840s and 1850s. Like other Northern moderates, he regretted, and was often embittered by, the polarizing effect of Southern proslavery state's rights advocates, like John C. Calhoun, and Northern antislavery radicals, like William Lloyd Garrison. Coles sought to ameliorate the impact of these extreme positions by assuming a middle course that he hoped would attract support from enough individuals from both parties and sections of the country to form a national majority. He believed that the Federal government possessed the authority to restrict slavery. More than any other document, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 supported his contention and demonstrated that the Founders held similar views. He also maintained that by restricting the expansion of slavery, Southerners would eventually, as Virginians had, experience the detrimental effects of slavery, a circumstance he hoped would lead slaveholders to reconsider the utility of gradual emancipation and colonization as a legitimate and practical solution to the slavery issue. To increase the merits of his perspective, Coles routinely associated the basic tenets of his program with both Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

Coles's reasoning, however, ignored a number of conditions that diminished the attractiveness of his proposal. While Virginia and other border states certainly witnessed declining fortunes as enslaved laborers became increasingly impractical for the cultivation

\textsuperscript{37}For the National Intelligencer," undated, Commonplace Book, Volume VII, 97. See also Fehrenbacher, The Slaveholding Republic, 81-88.
of wheat, slavery remained economically viable and profitable in the Deep South, where bound laborers produced cotton and rice. Additionally, as Randolph’s proposal revealed, even among Virginians who experienced first hand the ill-effects of slavery, many slaveholders probably would have preferred to sell their enslaved laborers to domestic slave traders than arrange for their emancipation and removal. More importantly, few Southerners could accept that the Federal government had the authority to interfere with slavery in the West, and, therefore, were unwilling or unable to consider the scenario Coles envisioned. Despite these problems and his unsuccessful efforts to convince the Virginia legislature and Madison to pursue his program, Coles remained committed to gradual emancipation, colonization, and federal restrictions on westward expansion as the only middle course capable of resolving the slavery controversy while simultaneously preserving the Union.

The movement for the annexation of Texas, the war with Mexico, and the resulting Compromise of 1850 provided Coles with an opportunity to publicize his resolution to the territorial controversy, and simultaneously present both Jefferson and Madison as advocates for his cause. In September 1848, he received a letter from fellow Pennsylvanian and president of the Free Soil Convention in Reading, B. W. Richards, requesting that he provide “a narrative of . . . the views known by you to be entertained by those great fathers of the republic.” Published in the National Intelligencer, the editors introduced the correspondence by identifying Coles “as the ardent supporter and personal friend of Thomas Jefferson, by whom he was from his youth upwards admitted to the closest and most honorable intimacy.” Although they noted that the ex-governor had

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retired from public life, the editors maintained that Coles's general interest in politics, "especially on the question of excluding slavery from the Territories and of limiting its further extension," had led him to give "the weight of his years, character and long public services to the side of Free Democracy in the Union." Few readers should doubt, they exclaimed, that Coles's views "accord entirely with the principles of the Free Democracy, [and are] . . . but another proof of the fact, that of all parties, theirs alone in this contest is true to the spirit and principles of the Constitution as understood by its immortal founders." 38

By the winter of 1848, the nation's political leadership had been embroiled in a debate over territorial expansion and slavery for several years. In 1844, James K. Polk narrowly defeated Henry Clay for the presidency largely because he promised to annex both Texas and Oregon. Two years later, he divided Oregon with Great Britain, initiated a war with Mexico, and focused his attention on acquiring New Mexico and California. In the process, Polk thrust the slavery issue into national politics and inadvertently caused a rift in the Democratic party. Echoing the language of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, David Wilmot, a free soil Democrat from Pennsylvania, proposed that slavery be banned from all the territory acquired as a result of the war with Mexico. Increasing support among Northern Democrats for his proposal signaled more ominously the extent of the division emerging in the Democratic party and simultaneously provided Whigs with a concrete issue with which to differentiate themselves from and weaken the strength of

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their opponents. By the mid 1840s, then, slavery and territorial expansion were the central issues discussed within and between the nation’s political parties.39

As they attempted to explain their support for or opposition to territorial expansion and the problem of slavery in the West, most of the participants in the debate sought to strengthen their cause by linking their arguments with the ideas espoused by their revolutionary forefathers. Coles and Free Soilers, for example, portrayed themselves as the true heirs of the founding generation. Like their predecessors, they believed that slavery was inconsistent with the ideals that served as the foundation of the American form of governance. Citing the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, the abolition of the slave trade in 1808, and the Missouri Compromise, they argued that the members of the revolutionary generation had consistently sought to limit the growth and expansion of slavery. Additionally, Free Soilers claimed that these political precedents revealed that the Founders understood that the federal government possessed the authority to legislate on the slavery issue.40


40Of course, a variety of perspectives existed among Free Soil supporters. Free Soil Democrats did not oppose the Mexican war or the acquisition of additional territory. Expansion remained an important component of their nation vision, for they believed that as Americans immigrated westward individual liberty and equality would be guaranteed. Without the acquisition of additional territory, the United States would become increasingly divided between the rich and the poor with all the attendant evils apparent in British society. They supported the Wilmot Proviso, then, to demonstrate to their supporters their unwillingness to wage a war simply to extend slavery. Additionally, by adopting an antislavery posture, Free Soil Democrats hoped to deflate antislavery radicalism in the North. Free Soil Whigs, on the other hand, opposed the war and the acquisition of additional territory and they sought to avoid injecting the slavery issue into national politics. More importantly, they believed that the nation’s energies should remain focused on improving the economy and common interests between the sections as a way of preserving the Union and ensuring the progress of American society. See Morrison, Slavery and the American West, 13-38.
Calhounites, on the other hand, argued that the Federal government had been established to protect individual liberty and shield the minority from a potentially oppressive majority. As James Henry Hammond declared, "The South venerates the Constitution and is prepared to stand by it forever, such as it came from the hands of our fathers." From their perspective, slavery remained a local issue not to be interfered with by the national government and they contended that individuals could not be prevented from carrying their enslaved property into the West by national legislation. Both sides, then, viewed the territorial conflict as a contest between freedom and despotism.

Northern Free Soilers proclaimed that Southern slaveholders supported westward expansion in order to increase their power in Congress and maintain federal protection of slavery. Southerners viewed their opponents' desire to increase the power of the central government as evidence of a Northern determination to oppress the South by restricting the rights of both the entire section and individual slaveholders. 41

The degree to which the rhetoric of veneration for the revolutionary past resonated with the public was never more clear than during the presidential campaign of 1848. The Democrats nominated Lewis Cass, a senator from Michigan who argued that the Constitution's territorial clause failed to grant Congress the power to pass the Wilmot Proviso or extend the 36° 30' boundary established by the Missouri Compromise. As an alternative solution to the territorial crisis, Cass offered an early version of the doctrine of

popular sovereignty and endeavored to legitimize the scheme by connecting it to the revolutionary tradition of self-rule. "Leave to the people who will be affected by this question to adjust it upon their own responsibility and in their own manner." By doing so, he assured his audience, "we shall render another tribute to the original principles of our government."\(^\text{42}\)

In an effort to diffuse the slavery issue, the Whigs nominated General Zachary Taylor, whose ambiguous stance on slavery and territorial expansion allowed them to focus the campaign on his character rather than any particular issue. Whigs vigorously portrayed Taylor as a candidate who epitomized the morals and ideals of the founding generation. He was just like George Washington, they claimed; a man of little or no political experience who possessed a character and integrity that would allow him to rise above partisan divisions to unite and harmonize the country. "Gen. Taylor," declared one editorialist, "is a Whig of the Washington school - a man of great wisdom, stern integrity, inflexible virtue, [and] pure patriotism." Virginia Whig Thomas Flournoy contended that under Taylor's leadership the slavery issue "will be considered and acted upon in a spirit of patriotism; the recollections of the past and the bright hopes of the future," he continued, "will not be forgotten." Additionally, he assured his audience that "the memories of our fathers" would be perpetuated because the Whig party, and Taylor in particular, possessed

"a deep attachment to this Union, and . . . they will preserve it." Both sides, then, attempted to appropriate the authority of the past to strengthen support for their candidates.

As the rhetorical use of the legacy of the revolutionary generation became sectionalized, Coles viewed Richards's request as an opportunity to enhance his own authority, as well as the reputations of Jefferson and Madison, by promoting restrictions on the expansion of slavery. After confirming that he had indeed conversed with almost all of "the distinguished men who have adorned our country during the last forty years," Coles declared that "all of them, as well as the leaders who proceeded them, had been . . . opposed to slavery, and . . . [maintained] that it was a great moral, social, and political evil, and one which they hoped would soon cease to exist." Recalling Jefferson's deleted portion of the Declaration of Independence accusing Great Britain of forcing slavery on the American colonies, Coles castigated those who "want to do on the Pacific seaboard what they are in daily habit of denouncing England for having done on the Atlantic seaboard." As an intimate friend and political disciple of Thomas Jefferson, Coles assured his correspondent that if "the great apostle of liberty" were alive he would be astonished to learn that "his favorite and glorious ordinance of 1787 had violated the constitution" by depriving individuals of the right to hold "their fellow men as property in all the territories belonging to the United States." Worse still, he was convinced that Jefferson would be mortified by the recent claims of "the new school of advocates of slavery," or Calhounites,

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43Sciotto Gazette, January 19, 1848, cited in Morrison, Slavery and the American West, 88; Congressional Globe, 30th Congress, 1st Session, 842. See also Morrison, Slavery and the American West, 88-95.
who denied that all men were created equal and possessed the right to liberty. “This was considered by Jefferson and the other illustrious authors of our revolution,” proclaimed Coles, “as the cornerstone of our political edifice.”

Coles also expressed his regret that the country had become so divided over the slavery issue and placed primary responsibility for the excessively sectionalized status of the issue squarely on the shoulders of the “ultra slavery men of the new school.” These Southerners, Coles claimed, had provoked Northern antislavery radicalism by glorifying slavery, “proclaim[ing] it to be the cornerstone of our free institutions, without which they could not exist.” He then implored his readers, particularly Southerners, to “reject the counsels and influence” of the Calhounites. Instead, he encouraged “all parties . . . [to] enter on the subject with brotherly feelings,” and, adopting the language of the Founders, assured them that as long as they restricted the expansion of slavery “that time and the natural progress of events will eventually exterminate slavery from among us.” He closed the letter expressing the hope “that the friends of freedom will not lose hope or temper, but [will] keep cool, have faith in the virtue of the people, cling to the Union, [and] adhere perseveringly but dispassionately to the true Jeffersonian principles of liberty.” For Coles, then, the moderate road between Garrisonian abolitionists and proslavery and state’s rights Calhounites was a proactive federal government that employed its authority to prevent the expansion of slavery, an institution that undermined Jeffersonian notions of

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freedom and equality.

A month later Coles received a cordial letter from Martin Van Buren, the Free Soil candidate in the 1848 presidential election, expressing the "high gratitude I derived from" the perusal of his correspondence with Richards. "It brings new & striking additions to our side of the argument (if there can be room for argument on such a subject)" and, it was "conveyed," he continued, "in a spirit at once considerate, generous, humane, & noble." Van Buren assured Coles that the sentiments expressed in the communication had added to his already glorious reputation regarding the slavery issue and predicted that its publication would elevate his standing among the American people. As the Free Soil candidate for the presidency, Van Buren appreciated Coles’s efforts to discourage support for the administration’s territorial policies. Additionally, he informed Coles that he was glad such sentiments could be expressed by someone unburdened by political attachments. If he were not constrained by "the position in which my friends have placed me," he confessed, not only would he echo Coles’s sentiments, but he would "repeat from the House tops" the details of Coles’s career in Illinois as evidence of the popularity of the free Soil perspective. But, the fear that such a declaration would "expose my motives to an uncharitable and injurious character," prevented him from such behavior. As Coles had hoped, others recognized the value of his testimony and, like him, believed it would increase public support for a West free of slavery.45

45 Martin Van Buren to Edward Coles, October 1, 1848, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU. Although Coles hated Andrew Jackson with an almost unreasonable passion, Van Buren’s defection from the Democratic Party and recent family connection to Coles probably allowed the two men to become friends. Coles’s niece, Angelica, married Van Buren’s son, John.

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A year later, the national debate over the territories and slavery remained unresolved and politics had become so sectionalized that neither the Whigs nor the Democrats could boast of, or count on, party unity in Congress. Between the spring of 1848 and the early summer of 1850, a number of moderate proposals surfaced as national leaders attempted to break the congressional deadlock that prohibited any progress on the issue. Although he assumed office without publically espousing a proposal to organize the land acquired from Mexico, Zachary Taylor privately pursued a program that would sidestep the territorial issue by encouraging California and New Mexico to apply for statehood immediately. By the fall of 1849, California submitted a constitution for congressional approval and, although Taylor's tactics did not generate widespread support, some politicians viewed his actions as a clever alternative. In January 1850, Henry Clay proposed a different moderate program that included each of the components that would eventually form the Compromise of 1850. While his program included a variety of proposals that had the potential to appease the disparate perspectives within Congress, Clay's actions angered President Taylor, who interpreted the move as an attempt to undermine his leadership of the nation and the Whig party.

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*Morrison, *Slavery and the American West, 97-100. Northern Whigs formed a coalition with Free Soil Democrats, but they each espoused different reasons for opposing the expansion of slavery. Northern Whigs opposed the westward extension of slavery because they believed that the institution prohibited national, as well as individual, progress. Free Soilers, however, objected to slavery in the West because they felt that slavery inhibited individual liberty and the spread of free labor. Similarly, Southern Whigs and Democrats joined forces to support the westward expansion of slavery for different reasons. Southern Whigs viewed slavery as an essential element of upward mobility and progress in the South and West. They opposed any restriction of slavery as a violation of an individual's right to pursue economic independence. Southern Democrats felt that the defense of slavery was the final barrier preventing the exploitation of a minority, both as individuals and states, from the oppression of a majority, the North.

*Morrison, *Slavery and the American West, 105-09. On the tradition of moderate constitutional unionism, see Peter B. Knupfer, *The Union As It Is: Constitutional Unionism and Sectional Compromise,*
Debate over Clay's compromise package raged for six months. Free Soilers opposed it because Clay allowed for the possibility of slavery in the West. Calhounites objected because slavery was excluded from California and they continued to believe that residents of the southern portion of the territory wanted to divide the region and legalize slavery. Moderate Democrats also opposed the compromise because they contended that the federal government lacked the authority to legislate on the slavery issue. As an alternative, moderate Democrats suggested that the government should allow the territories to decide the issue for themselves. They claimed that the doctrine of the Founding Fathers included the belief that "the people are the fountain of all power and source of all authority - that they have instituted governments for their own ends - that they have a right to establish and modify their government at will." This reference to the Founders was reminiscent of the arguments offered by the pro-conventionists in Illinois nearly twenty-five years earlier. Throughout the Illinois convention crisis, pro-conventionists maintained that slavery had nothing to do with their desire to revise the Constitution and that those who opposed the convention were really


Morrison, *Slavery and the American West*, 119-25; Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 76-85. Some Northern Democrats were so confident in the superiority of free institutions and the economic potential of free labor, and also, believed that the geographic character of the region in question precluded the use of enslaved labor. Consequently, they saw popular sovereignty as a convenient way to accomplish their larger goal, the exclusion of slavery from the West, while simultaneously, appeasing their Southern counterparts. Those Southern Democrats who supported popular sovereignty did so because they firmly believed that the right to self-government was a fundamental principle worth defending. If Southerners immigrated to the West, they wanted them to have at least the opportunity to decide for themselves whether or not they would employ enslaved laborers.

denying Illinoisans their republican right to self-government. Consequently, Coles probably viewed popular sovereignty as little more than an abstraction that could be employed to the benefit of pro- and antislavery advocates alike. From his perspective, the scheme offered by the moderate Democrats only delayed the resolution of the problem facing the nation, and, therefore, deserved little support. Like most moderates, however, Coles wanted to calm the storm of fanaticism generated by the abolitionists and the Calhounites. But his moderate perspective led him to support both Clay’s compromise measures because he believed Congress had the right to restrict slavery, or Taylor’s proposal, because he, like Jefferson and Madison, felt that slavery was a dying institution that would, if left alone, eventually be eradicated.

As he monitored the contest between moderate proposals from his home in Philadelphia, Coles became convinced that “the conduct of the ultra politicians of the day,” if left unchecked, would “destroy our hallowed Union.” Unwilling to allow such a tragic development, he transcribed and dispatched a copy of James Madison’s “Advice to my Country” to Henry Clay in March 1850. Composed in October 1834, Madison intended the document to reach the public only after his death. In this way, he hoped that his comments would not be attributed to partisan interests. It should “be entitled,” he declared, “to whatever weight can be derived from good intentions” and granted to an individual who had dedicated his life to his country and “the cause of liberty.” After confessing that his fondest wish was that the Union should be preserved and bequeathed to the next generation intact, Madison implored his readers to “Let the open enemy of it [the Union] be regarded as a Pandora with her box opened; and the disguised one as the
Serpent rising with his deadly [venom] into Paradise.” Coles informed Clay that he hoped the document and the sentiments it contained “might be used to good effect during the present diseased state of the public mind,” which he contended were “brought about by political quacks & madmen.”

A week later, Clay thanked Coles for providing him with such a valuable document and assured his correspondent that “should a suitable occasion offer” he would place it “before the public.” He then informed Coles that “there is less violence and more calmness prevailing,” and revealed that “so far I feel encouraged.” Still, he confessed that while “My hopes are dom inate, . . . all my fears are not yet defeated.” With President Taylor’s death in early July, Millard Fillmore’s pledge to support Clay’s proposals, and Stephen Douglas’s assumption of responsibility for marshaling the compromise through Congress, a resolution to the territorial controversy seemed imminent. Significantly, when the final piece of the compromise became law, the resolution’s popular sovereignty component transformed the compromise into more of a victory for congressional non-intervention than either Clay or Coles would have anticipated. Still, they both placed the preservation of the Union above the particulars and were reassured that the territorial controversy was finally over.


51 Henry Clay to Edward Coles, March 21, 1850, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU. See also Fehrenbacher, The Slaveholding Republic, 272-73 and Morrison, Slavery and the American West, 124-25. Coles also furnished the editors of the National Intelligencer with a copy of Madison’s “Advice” soon after Congress approved the compromise. When he learned that part of the public doubted the authenticity of the document, he dispatched a letter of explanation to the editors. Additionally, he
Although his preferred course of gradual emancipation and colonization remained unrealized and since the slavery issue appeared resolved, Coles settled into a more private routine of monitoring the public discourse to identify occasions when politicians and editorialists erroneously employed the legacy of either Jefferson or Madison. In August 1852, for example, Coles penned a letter to senator Charles Sumner “to correct an error you lately made in the Senate, by which you take from him [Jefferson], & give to another, one of the noblest & most consistent acts of his life:” the authorship of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. While he admitted that Jefferson was in France at the time of the Ordinance’s passage, Coles maintained that Jefferson, not Nathan Dane, was the originator of the clause prohibiting slavery in the region north of the Ohio River.

“[H]owever zealous & influential he [Dane] may have been in effecting the final passage” of the Ordinance, Coles assured Sumner that he deserved “no credit for the applauded clause . . . which, in the words of Jefferson, . . . provided for the prohibition of slaves in all Territory” in the Old Northwest.52

instructed Gales and Seaton to publish it under a heading that suggested “the intimate & confidential relations” he enjoyed with Madison as proof of “my claim to confidence . . . from the public.” Noting that many doubted the genuineness of the manuscript because it had not “appeared at an earlier day when it might have been appealed to with effect,” Coles disclosed that he had provided “my friend Richd Rush” with a copy as early as 1842. In the spring of 1850, he maintained, Rush transcribed a copy of it into a letter to Virginia Senator James M. Mason, who then arranged for its publication. Additionally, Coles confessed that he had given a copy to Henry Clay. Far from being concealed from the nation’s political leaders or the public when it could have been most useful, Coles explained that the final sentiments of the revered Founder had been readily available. See Edward Coles to Gales and Seaton, February 20, 1851, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU. Madison’s “Advice” appeared in the National Intelligencer on February 6 and 1851.

Sumner responded to Coles’s injunction by insisting that he disagreed with the ex-
governor’s recollection of the past. While he certainly recognized that Jefferson was
responsible for “the early though unsuccessful effort” to prohibit slavery, he assured Coles
that ample proof existed demonstrating “that the Ordinance of 1787, as finally adopted,
was from the pen of Nathan Dane.” As proof, he offered Dane’s own testimony in “his
great work on American Law, published in 1824,” Daniel Webster’s first speech in the
“celebrated debate of 1830,” as well as his “reply to Mr. Hayne.” Although they
disagreed, Sumner assured Coles of his “respect for your character . . . & my gratitude for
the steadfast support you have ever given to the principle of Freedom advocated by
Jefferson.”

Unwilling to let Sumner’s contentions go unchallenged, Coles spent most of the
fall of 1852 composing an article designed to prove that Thomas Jefferson was the original
author of the antislavery article included in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. In his
December 1852 letter to the editors of the National Intelligencer, Coles justified his
request for publication by claiming that his essay contained “some interesting facts not
fully known. Some of these,” he continued, “have been erroneously stated in high places,
and on that account required to be . . . corrected.” Referring specifically to the sources
Sumner cited in his letter the previous year, Coles denied that any of them had consulted
the original congressional records and accused them of relying solely “on the authority and


53Charles Sumner to Edward Coles, August 23, 1852, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868,
PU.
high character of Nathan Dane.” An investigation of the Journals of Congress, Coles revealed, failed to demonstrate that Dane had participated in any significant way in the formation of the Ordinance. Instead, he appeared only sporadically as a member of the committee responsible for reporting the final version of the document.  

Coles then turned his attention to a detailed comparison of the document produced by Jefferson in 1784 and the Ordinance as adopted by Congress in 1787. The most important consistency between the two documents, maintained Coles, was the wording of the clause prohibiting slavery. Although the 1787 document implemented the prohibition earlier than Jefferson proposed, the language of the rest of the article was identical to that which appeared in Jefferson’s document. Coles also highlighted a significant difference between Jefferson’s document and the final version. Coles claimed that Jefferson’s original draft stipulated that the regulations should “apply to all territory ceded, or to be ceded” to the Federal government by the individual states. The Ordinance, however, limited the application of its articles only “to the territory previously acquired.” Consequently, while the Ordinance proscribed the application of its antislavery clause, Jefferson would have prohibited slavery from any territory acquired in the future as well. Given the similarity in language of the antislavery provisions, as well as the antislavery tenor of the 1784 compact, Coles maintained that few should doubt Jefferson’s antislavery principles or his authorship.

From Coles’s perspective, Jefferson’s authorship was important because it 

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54This and the next two paragraphs come from “To the Editors. Who Was the Author of the Ordinance of 1787,” signed Edward Coles, National Intelligencer, January 4, 1853.
established his antislavery credentials. It also demonstrated that such ideas could come from a Southerner. As an advocate of “prospective and gradual emancipation in Virginia,” Coles argued that Jefferson intended his plan of government “to abolish it [slavery], as well as provide by compact its perpetual inhibition” in the territories acquired from individual states. Additionally, by emphasizing that the Ordinance’s antislavery component originated with a Southern statesman, and “one of the most distinguished political founders of our liberty,” Coles sought to challenge the increasingly sectional representation of antislavery sentiment and diminish sectional hostilities. Coles concluded that the weight and influence of Jefferson’s authorship and the subsequent unanimous congressional support for the final version of the Ordinance, should establish authoritatively that the founding generation shared an antislavery sensibility and believed that the federal government possessed the power to restrict the westward expansion of the institution.

A few days after its publication, Coles asked John Van Buren, his niece’s husband and a resident of New York, to review his article. “If upon perusal you should think it worthy of a more extended circulation,” Coles requested that Van Buren “exert your influence with some good Jeffersonian Editor in New York to republish it.” A few weeks later, Martin Van Buren, John’s father, congratulated Coles for producing such an “able & very conclusive article in vindication of Mr. Jefferson” and expressed his regret that recent politicians had failed to remember their predecessors appropriately. Coles replied a few days later and informed the Little Magician that “like you, [I] have occasionally felt mortified & disheartened by . . . the want of attachment and veneration for the memory of
our great founders.” Perhaps even more detestable, observed Coles, was the habit of “This new or Calhoun school of politicians, [who] while they avow themselves admirers & thoroughgoing disciples of the Jefferson school, denounce him . . . [when they] proclaim . . . that Slavery is a blessing, and Freedom, unaccompanied by Slavery, a curse.” Coles then encouraged Van Buren to employ his leisure time recording his recollections and impressions of Jefferson and his ideas. “These political maxims & sayings,” Coles proclaimed, “have much more influence in forming public opinion than fine rhetoric & cogent logic, used however dexterously in making long speeches.”

Although he noted that no one had attempted to “controvert in any way” his 1853 publication, Coles felt compelled by the astonishing events in Kansas to compose once again a discourse on the history of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Delivered before the Pennsylvania Historical Society on June 9, 1856, Coles chose to use the occasion to emphasize the Ordinance’s historical role restricting the expansion of slavery rather than focus on Jefferson’s authorship. As in the earlier publication, he argued that Jefferson intended his document to abolish slavery and prevent the further introduction of bound laborers in the regions above and below the Ohio River. Coles maintained that Jefferson delayed the implementation of the antislavery clause not from any lack of antislavery commitment but, instead, because he recognized that many of the French inhabitants, as well as some of the American settlers, in the region already possessed enslaved laborers.

5Edward Coles to John Van Buren, January 6, 1853; Martin Van Buren to Edward Coles, January 19, 1853; Edward Coles to Martin Van Buren, January 25, 1853; The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU. See also Edward Coles to Joseph Cabell, May 26, 1853, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU. Coles thanked Cabell for his positive notice of his publication. “I was more pleased at your approbation & flattering commendation of my publication,” revealed Coles, “from the fact of some of my Southern friends having said that it did not add to the reputation of Mr. Jefferson.”
“This provision recognized the existence of slavery, and contemplated the toleration of it in those States for sixteen years,” after which Jefferson intended slavery “to cease” altogether and throughout the region. 

Unlike in the 1853 publication, Coles attempted to refute any claims denying the effectiveness of the Ordinance’s antislavery clause by including in his essay an explanation for the persistence of slavery in the region. He argued that while “the larger and more intelligent slaveholders” moved across the Mississippi River to avoid liberating their enslaved laborers, the region’s “poorer and less intelligent masters,” unaware of the law, “continued to hold and to treat their late slaves as if the Ordinance had not emancipated them.” Additionally, the Southern character of both the inhabitants and the officials governing the region created a degree of apathy that permitted the illegal institution to survive into the mid-nineteenth century. “If the question had ever been brought before me, as Governor of the State,” declared Coles, “I would not have hesitated for a moment to decide, and . . . to have enforced the decision, that slavery did not legally exist in Illinois, and of course [that] all held in service . . . were entitled to their freedom.” With the exception of those bound laborers held in violation of the Ordinance, Coles maintained that the “instrument effected the object of its enlightened and benevolent author.”

Once he confirmed that the Ordinance was an antislavery document, Coles turned

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57[Coles], Ordinance of 1787, 17-20, quote on 18-19, ISHL.
his attention to demonstrating both the congressional and public attitude toward the law. Emboldened by the persistence of slavery among them, residents of the various territories created in the region frequently petitioned Congress asking for a repeal of the antislavery clause. On five occasions between 1803 and 1807, Congress refused to grant the requests of the territorial residents. When coupled with the unanimous support for the Ordinance during its passage in 1787, Coles contended, few should doubt that Congress recognized and repeatedly sustained its authority to ban slavery from the nation's territories. As further evidence of Congress's authority, Coles cited the multiple occasions when various residents referred to the Ordinance to confirm their contention that Congress could restrict the geographic scope of slavery. In June 1850, for example, Senator Thomas Hart Benton justified his vote against "the extension of slavery" by citing the Ordinance and the Missouri Compromise. Additionally, a number of territories petitioning for statehood, Ohio, Indiana, and Oregon among them, adopted the language of the Ordinance's antislavery clause to ensure they entered the Union as free states. Even the language in the Missouri statehood bill establishing the boundary above which slavery would be illegal employed the very words Jefferson initially wrote in 1784 and which appeared in the final version of the 1787 document. Together, these examples, maintained Coles, confirmed that Congress possessed the authority to prohibit the expansion of the institution of slavery.58

Coles concluded his remarks by reminding his audience that "between 1787 and 1854, when the Missouri compromise was repealed, a period of sixty-seven years, eight

58Ibid., 29-31.
different Congresses passed, and six different individuals acting as Presidents of the United States, viz: Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Tyler, and Polk, approved eight laws of the United States, enacting and re-enacting, sanctioning and confirming and extending, as well in length of time, as extent of space, the ordinance of 1787."

Additionally, individuals from "all sections . . . and all the numerous parties," he proclaimed, "have given to it their approbation and sanction." Few should doubt, then, that the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 was an "inconsistency . . . truly mortifying" and dangerous to the Union. As proof of his contention, Coles revealed that since 1854 "we have had nothing but contention, riots, and threats, if not the awful realities of civil war."

Within a few days of Coles's presentation, an editor of a Philadelphia newspaper complained that the document had yet to be furnished for publication. Noting that Coles's paper could only have been "written in the temperate and truthful spirit of . . . [a] venerable statesman," the editor demanded that the Pennsylvania Historical Society explain why they were "withhold[ing] it from the public." He suspected that a devious political motive was responsible for the delay. "The elements of excitement and bitterness are everywhere. Political hostility," he continued, "seems to have assumed a more than wonted asperity." Worse still, "Civil war rages in [Kansas] . . . and the strife and its causes grow out of the one question of slavery." All those who cherish the Union, he proclaimed, "looked with eagerness for a paper, which . . . would tend to allay irritation and excitement and heal the breach between our Northern and Southern fellow-citizens, by showing that at other times and in other days they had thought alike and voted together on

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50Ibid., 32-33.
this subject.” Like Coles, the editors observed the events unfolding around them with shock and trepidation. At the same time, they sought to console themselves and convince others to reform their views by reminding the public of a legacy of compromise initiated by the Founders and sustained by their true disciples during the conflicts over slavery during the first half of the nineteenth century. From their perspective, Coles’s history of the Ordinance of 1787 seemed to offer just such an opportunity.⁶⁰

Throughout the 1850s, Coles also exerted his energies ensuring that James Madison was recognized as an antislavery statesmen in both principle and practice. Initiated in the summer of 1849, Coles orchestrated a campaign designed to prove that Madison had always intended to emancipate his enslaved laborers. As he had first expressed in 1836, Coles continued to believe that Madison had left a codicil to his will directing his widow to emancipate his slaves at her death. During a visit to Warm Springs, Virginia, in September 1849, he encountered William Taylor, the brother of lawyer Robert Taylor who had drafted Madison’s will. William informed Coles that Mrs. Nellie Willis, Madison’s favorite niece, had confirmed that Madison, impressed by the difficulties of freeing his bound laborers during his wife’s lifetime, had “finally concluded not to free them in his Will.” Taylor assured Coles, however, that, while Madison had not performed the task himself, “Mrs. Madison knew his wishes & views” and had been instructed to “carry them into effect at her death.” Two months later, Henry Clay visited him in

⁶⁰“The Historical Society, Ex-Gov. Coles’ Address on the Ordinance of 1787,” reprinted in William B. Coles, The Coles Family of Virginia: Its Numerous Connections, from the Emigration to America to the Year 1915 (New York, 1931), 119-121. Coles does not identify the newspaper or the editor of this piece. See also Lewis, “The Philadelphia Years,” 71-74, ISHL.
Philadelphia and corroborated Taylor’s rendition of Madison’s intentions. He told Coles that Mrs. Madison had “mentioned to him that her Husband expected her to free his slaves at her death.” Armed with sufficient evidence to sustain his declarations regarding Madison’s antislavery commitments, Coles composed a memorandum outlining the details of his conversations with Taylor and Clay.61

Over the next several years, Coles painstakingly verified the testimony in his possession. In December 1855, he wrote a letter to Nellie Willis “to enquire what you know, or have good reason to believe, was your Uncle Madison’s wishes and intentions as to freeing his Slaves, and the reason why he did not do it in his Will.” His “deep and absorbing interest . . . in whatever concerns the character and fame of your illustrious Uncle,” he assured her, was the only motivation for his request. Acknowledging the delicacy of his inquiry, Coles encouraged Willis to provide him with “a frank reply” because “the time may come, either during my life or afterwards, when it maybe desirable for me or my children to have evidence corroborative of mine to sustain” Madison’s antislavery character.62

Nellie Willis’s son, John, responded to Coles’s request ten days later. While he revealed that his mother did not recall engaging in the conversation William Taylor disclosed, John confirmed that his mother understood that “it was strongly his [Madison’s] wish to emancipate” his bound laborers and that he had not freed them in his will because

61“Warm Springs, September 1849,” The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.

62Edward Coles to Nellie C. Willis, December 18, 1855, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.
he expected his wife "would emancipate them at her death." Furthermore, his mother
recalled that Madison had left written instructions on the subject. On the day of his burial,
he maintained, his mother witnessed Dolley Madison retrieve "from a drawer two sealed
papers the one endorsed ‘My will opened and resealed by myself’ and the other endorsed
‘To be opened only by my wife should she be living at the time of my death.’" Apparently,
the latter envelope, "which nothing more was ever seen of" again, was thought to have
contained written directions on the subject of the slaves. By the mid-1850s, then, all of
Coles's investigations confirmed that Madison had intended to liberate his slaves and had
failed to do so, not because of any hesitation on his own part, but because his wife had
neglected to honor his wishes. As far as Coles was concerned, then, James Madison had
consistently expressed his opposition to slavery. While the act of emancipation had failed
to materialize in his will, Madison’s intention was sufficient enough to preserve his
reputation as an antislavery statesman.  

Emboldened with such evidence, Coles sought to make his impressions of Madison
as an antislavery statesmen a permanent part of the public record. When Virginia historian
Hugh Blair Grigsby solicited his impressions of Madison for his history of the Virginia
convention of 1788, Coles assured him that Madison had intended to free his slaves.
Madison had not emancipated them in his will, he explained, because the fourth president
had left written instructions of "his intention, if not injunction, that she [his wife] should."

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63 John Willis to Edward Coles, December 19, 1855, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.
Due to several prolonged illnesses and thwarted efforts to visit Virginia, when he had planned to speak
with John Willis and his mother in person, Coles did not respond to Willis's December 19th letter until
January 26, 1857.
In 1857, when William Cabell Rives contacted him for information on Madison for the biography he was preparing, Coles provided Rives with a copy of John Willis’s December 1855 letter suggesting the existence of a codicil to his will emancipating his slaves. Furthermore, Coles felt that, as his biographer, Rives had a special obligation to present the fullest portrait of his subject. “However painful it may be to you to make such a disclosure, or encounter for a time the prejudice which may be created in certain quarters against you, for stating the fact of Mr. Madison’s intentions to free his slaves,” Coles assured his correspondent that the censure “by posterity” he would endure for “omitting to mention so important a fact” would be even more painful. That same year, Coles also wrote Charles J. Ingersoll, who claimed that “‘Madison finding his slaves unprofitable, directed by his last Will that they be sold,’” to correct the error and provided him with a copy of Madison’s will as proof. While he had yet to receive a response from Ingersoll, he suggested to Rives that his biography could prevent such misrepresentations from appearing during periods of “ferver of partisanship” and ensure that Madison’s true “feelings & principles” become a permanent part of history.64

Other Northern Unionists shared Coles’s desire to establish the founding generation’s antislavery principles. In the summer of 1856, for example, John C. Winthrop, a Massachusetts Whig who frequently “express[ed] . . . that in the further

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64Edward Coles to Hugh B. Grigsby, December 23, 1854; Edward Coles to William Cabell Rives, February 3, 1857, William Cabell Rives Papers, Box 85 and 89, Library of Congress. As early as January 1856, Coles invited Rives to visit with him in Philadelphia, when a more intimate interview would permit him to discuss “some delicate subjects [Madison and emancipation] the more so on account of their involving others, on which I should like to confer with you as to the extent to which they should be divulged.” See Edward Coles to William Cabell Rives, January 21, 1856, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.
progress of the painful controversies which now agitate the country, there may be 
exhibited more of that spirit of moderation and forbearance which can alone lead to a 
happy solution,” published a letter responding to a publication by William Cabell Rives in 
which Madison’s biographer claimed that the fourth president denied “the general power 
of Congress to prohibit the introduction of slavery in the territories.” As a part of his 
refutation of Rives’s remarks, Winthrop revealed that he had visited Montpelier in 1832 
and that during his conversations with Madison, the elder statesman had stated that “he 
had begun to conceive a confident hope that slavery was not to be a perpetual institution, 
and that he thought there would be no difficulty in a system of gradual emancipation.”

While he conceded that Madison’s November 1819 letter to Robert Walsh was “entitled to 
great weight,” Winthrop maintained that President Monroe, “who could hardly fail to have 
had the advantage of Mr. Madison’s best advice,” signed the Missouri Compromise into 
law and, thereby, sanctioned the authority of Congress to limit the expansion of slavery. 
Additionally, like Coles, Winthrop maintained that the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, 
which received the unanimous approval of a Congress of which Madison was a member, 
contained a clause prohibiting slavery. He then implored the South “to acquiesce without 
a struggle in the operation of those physical and moral causes which seem so likely to 
make Kansas a State for free labor only.” By doing so, he assured his correspondent that 
“the day would not be far distant when we might look for a complete restoration of 
kindness and concord throughout the Union.”

65“Robert C. Winthrop to William Cabell Rives, June 24, 1856,” Boston Daily Courier, July 22, 
1856, clipping, Edward Coles Collection, HSP. In his November 1819 letter to Robert Walsh, Madison 
argued that “Congress did not regard the interdict of Slavery among the needful regulations contemplated
A week after his publication appeared in a Boston newspaper, Winthrop and Coles socialized together at a summer retreat in Newport, Rhode Island. Coles apparently read Winthrop’s publication and discussed Madison, slavery, and the political crisis in Kansas at length with the Massachusetts native. Disappointed that his wife’s illness had prevented them from continuing their conversation, Winthrop informed Coles in a hastily written letter that he had intended to continue to “review with you my remembrances of Mr. Madison’s conversation” on the slavery issue. He repeated his contention that Madison had confessed to him that the sentiments expressed by the members of Virginia’s legislature in 1832 had given the aged ex-president a renewed confidence “that Slavery will not last forever.” He also admitted that he was “glad my representations of Mr. Madison’s views accords so well with your knowledge of them, & that my only error, if any, is in making him out less of a Anti-Slavery man than he really was.”

Coles acknowledged that “the Debates in the Legislature of Virginia to which you allude did cheer him, as they did all the sound men of that day, with the hope that ‘the march of time,’ as Mr. Jefferson expressed it, seemed to be more rapid, and nearer by the Constitution.” See James Madison to Robert Walsh, November 27, 1819, Letters and Other Writings of James Madison, III: 154-55. See also McCoy, The Last of the Fathers, 108-13. Coles expressed a strong disbelief that Madison could have ever voiced such a sentiment. In a letter to William Cabell Rives in the summer of 1857, Coles implored Madison’s biographer to double check James McGuire’s transcription of the letter. “I have too much respect for Mr. Madison to believe that this can be correctly printed. . . . To say that Congress never interdicted Slavery in any of the Territories, in the face of the renown Ordinance of 1787, which was passed by unprecedented unanimity, by both the old and new Congress while Mr. M was a Member of them, and was recognized and sanctioned by President Madison, in his approval of the laws admitting Indiana & Illinois into the Union, is indeed a bold & reckless assertion for any man to make, and is perfectly incredible that it even was made by so learned and pure a man as Madison.” See Edward Coles to William Cabell Rives, June 19, 1857, William Cabell Rives Papers, Box 89, Library of Congress.

66Robert C. Winthrop to Edward Coles, July 28, 1856, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786-1868, PU.

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consumation, than had been anticipated.” But, Coles lamented how, “under the influence of J. C. Calhoun and his followers, and their allies the ultra Abolitionists - both bitterly opposed to each other in everything, except . . . the dissolution of our blessed Union,” the progress made toward the abolition of slavery had been severely “retrograded.” From his perspective, even those who joined him in the crusade to employ Madison’s authority to quell the destructive forces of the day often failed to recognize the extent of Madison’s antislavery commitment. Consequently, he felt compelled, whether through conversations or publications, to correct any erroneous representations of his mentor’s antislavery credentials, even if it meant chastising an ally.67

As the slavery issue repeatedly disrupted national politics throughout the 1840s and 1850s, Edward Coles sought to shape the national discourse and the outcome of the public debates by reminding his audience of the original intentions of the founding generation. To that end he frequently employed his authority as an intimate of both Thomas Jefferson and James Madison to present the Founding Fathers as antislavery statesmen. From his perspective, the nation’s forefathers believed that slavery was a moral, political, and social evil that should be eradicated. Although they opposed immediate unconditional emancipation, they had consistently supported gradual emancipation, colonization and legislation that limited the geographical expansion of the institution. According to Coles, a veneration of the past, and particularly the visions of the Republic as articulated by the founding generation, would serve as an elixir, powerful

enough to heal the political wounds of the present and protect the nation against any future threats to its survival.

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On November 6, 1860, Nicholas P. Trist, a longtime friend and fellow unionist, appeared at Edward Coles’s door to encourage the seventy-four year old to cast his ballot in the presidential election. Fearful that Coles would be discouraged from participating in the election by poor weather and infirmity, Trist offered “my arm” and escorted Coles to the polls, where, to Trist’s delight, Coles cast his vote for Republican Abraham Lincoln. After a long and bitter campaign in which all of the candidates and their supporters boasted of their revolutionary patrimony and throughout which threats of disunion appeared regularly, Lincoln emerged victorious. He won two-fifths of the votes cast and registered a majority in every free state. His chief opponent, Southern Democrat John C. Breckenridge, won all of the Southern states except Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee, where Constitutional Unionist John Bell posted majorities. While Coles and most Republicans viewed Lincoln’s victory as a triumph for restriction and the preservation of the Union, most Southerners, whether they supported Breckenridge or Bell, believed that the Republican ascendancy signaled the end of sectional equality and the destruction of Southern rights. Consequently, six weeks after the election South Carolina seceded from the Union and was followed by all the other Deep South states by early February 1861. Rather than securing the survival of the Union, then, Lincoln’s election divided the nation.
Despite the ominous signs of discord, Coles remained optimistic. In February 1861, when the president-elect traveled through Philadelphia on his way to Washington, Coles ventured to the Continental Hotel to greet Lincoln and congratulate him on his election. After “forcing his way through the crowd,” he shook hands with the nation’s new leader, who “expressed great delight to see him, and said that he was held in universal reverence throughout the state of Illinois.” As men who shared a connection to Illinois, commitment to slavery restriction, determination to preserve the Union, and an affinity for the legacy of the Founders, Coles and Lincoln probably enjoyed an intense, if only brief, conversation. Coles’s enthusiasm for the potentially unifying character of Lincoln’s leadership, however, was short-lived. After the firing on Fort Sumter, Lincoln’s call for troops, and the secession of the Upper South, Coles found himself isolated from his family in Virginia and depressed as a result “of our political situation.” “From what has occurred, and will probably occur,” he informed his brother-in-law John Rutherfoord, “there is little or no prospect of my ever being again happy. . . . the remnant” of his life, he continued, “is destined I fear to be miserable.”

Indeed, his prediction would prove prophetic. Just before the outbreak of the war, Coles’s youngest son, Roberts moved to his father’s native state where he acquired a

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plantation from a family member. Unlike his father, who viewed the sectional crisis through the lense of the slavery issue, Roberts exhibited a strong commitment to the state and family heritage countless summer sojourns in Virginia had taught him to cherish. As he confessed to a friend in early October 1861, “When Virginia was invaded and its existence threatened, I volunteered.” Four months later on the eve of the final assault during the Battle of Roanoke Island, Roberts gallantly wrote his fiancée, Jenny Cary Fairfax, “Now I strike for Virginia,” chivalric words that would be his final statement.70 While the elder Coles ultimately lived to see his dream of a Union without slavery realized, the war tragically robbed him of his youngest son, who perished on the battle field. For Edward Coles, the price of emancipation and the reunion of the sections, it would seem, was the life of a son he always described as most resembling his Coles relations.

70Roberts Coles to [unknown friend], October 13, 1861; Roberts Coles to Jenny Cary Fairfax, February 7, 1862, The Coles Family Papers, VHS.
CONCLUSION

After several years of declining health, eighty-two year old Edward Coles died in his home on Spruce Street in Philadelphia on July 7, 1868. Seven days later, his wife Sally, eldest son Edward, and only daughter Mary gathered in Coles's parlor to learn the content of his last will and testament. As they expected, Coles generously provided financial support for each of his immediate family members. Accordingly, he divided his extensive property among his survivors and requested that each of his remaining family members receive twenty-five thousand dollars in cash. Coles’s will, however, also contained some special provisions that betrayed the degree to which his concern for the nation’s black population and revolutionary heritage continued to shape his view of the world he inhabited. Hoping “for the satisfaction of having my son to follow in my steps,” Coles directed that one thousand dollars be given to the American Colonization Society to ensure that, like him, his namesake would be “a life director of that Society.” Even more importantly, he instructed his executors to leave his “four portraits of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe” in the care of his son. Even in death, then, Coles continued to focus his attention on ensuring that the legacy of the Founding Fathers passed to the next generation intact.1


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By 1865 when he composed his last will and testament, Coles could reflect on a long life spent promoting an end to slavery and the preservation of the republican experiment. While he was born into a society that depended upon the labor of an enslaved population and was characterized by a Union constantly threatened with destruction, he was comforted by the knowledge that his children had never experienced directly such dependence and would enjoy an adulthood without the fear that their national community would be irrevocably divided. Even more importantly, he could be confident that neither of his children would be plagued, as he was, by the tension generated by the simultaneous, but often incompatible, existence of a conviction that slavery was morally and ideologically wrong and a determination to promote a particularly republican vision of the nation, for the North’s successful prosecution of the Civil War had produced a nation free of slavery and consolidated into one Union.

Indeed, as Edward Coles knew, American society had changed dramatically during the course of his lifetime. He was born into a privileged world in which men of wealth, education, and social standing dominated positions of authority in their local communities and on the national stage. Accordingly, he was raised and educated to assume a place among the nation’s civic leadership. While his genteel background provided him with an acute understanding of the importance of the public display and performance of elite status, Coles’s formal education at the College of William and Mary furnished him with the intellectual foundation to perform the responsibilities of his station. As a student in Williamsburg he absorbed the basic tenants of the natural rights ideology that had inspired


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the American Revolution and emerged from his college experience an enlightened gentleman of republican sensibility. Like most of his fellow-collegians, Coles left the College of William and Mary convinced that, as a member of the first generation to come of age after independence, he was charged with the daunting responsibility of ensuring the survival of the republican experiment.

Unlike most of his fellow-collegians, however, Coles also concluded his formal education with the conviction that his commitment to freedom and equality precluded the ownership of enslaved property. Accordingly, he returned to his family estate in Albemarle County, Virginia in the summer of 1807 harboring the intention to liberate any enslaved laborers he inherited from his father. Once it became clear that he could not accomplish his goal and remain in his native state, the young Virginian contemplated immigrating to free territory west of the Appalachian Mountains. An invitation to replace his brother as President James Madison's private secretary, however, forced him to consider delaying his western move. More than anything, the opportunity to pursue a public career in Washington City revealed the tension Coles felt between his desire to follow through with his convictions and his obligation to serve the nation. Initially, he decided to sacrifice the public distinction that would accompany a position in the President's family in order to sustain his ideals, but a chance meeting with James Monroe led him to change his mind, and in the winter of 1810, he assumed his post as the President's private secretary.

Far from discouraging him from emancipating his chattel property as his family and friends had hoped, Coles's experiences in Washington City and his subsequent diplomatic
mission abroad, only served to reinforced his determination to follow through with his conviction. On the one hand, his career as the president's private secretary exposed the degree to which the public authority of enlightened gentlemen of republican sensibility was essential to the successful administration of a republican government. On the other hand, his tenure in the nation's capital and his tour of Europe exposed in sharp relief the incompatibility of slavery and republican society. Consequently, Coles concluded his career in national politics convinced that the only way to ensure the survival of the republican experiment was to eliminate the institution of slavery.

Coles immigrated to Illinois in the spring of 1819, then, intending to conduct an experiment in republican freedom and equality and hoped that his experiences would demonstrate that slavery could be eliminated without risking the sanctity of the Union. He discovered, however, that while the region north of the Ohio River was free in principle, the reality was very different. Instead of a region bubbling with economic opportunity, open to free black settlement and free of the detrimental effects of slavery, the Old Northwest suffered from a severe economic recession, contained a rabidly anti-black population, and boasted a small, but very visible and growing, enslaved labor force. Worse still, many of the region's political leaders hoped to legalize slavery and offered the institution as a remedy to the state's worsening economic conditions.

More than anything, the confluence of these conditions led Coles to attempt to employ his public authority as an enlightened republican leader, to apply the political skills he had refined in Washington City, to remodel his adopted community into the free, independent, and economically prosperous society he had imagined it to be. To that end,
he pursued the governorship in 1822 and orchestrated a campaign that emphasized his genteel heritage and extensive political experience. At the same time, he recognized that to be successful, he would have to embrace some of the more popular political habits emerging on the frontier. Consequently, he also toured the state, gave stump speeches and mingled with voters by frequenting taverns, attending public dinners, and visiting private homes. While his electoral victory surprised everyone including himself, Coles was determined to use his new position of authority in the state to prevent the region's small, but politically powerful, proslavery majority from legalizing the institution of slavery.

In many ways, he believed that his position as governor afforded him a unique opportunity to fulfill his duty to serve the best interests of the nation and satisfy his determination to oppose slavery. Accordingly, in his first public address as governor, Coles called for the abolition of slavery and a revision of Illinois's black code, a demand that precipitated a political crisis that caused many residents to debate the type of society they intended Illinois to become. While he hoped that the elimination of slavery and the creation of a color-blind legal structure would transform the Prairie State into a community more reflective of the nation's revolutionary ideals, Coles soon discovered that few of his fellow-Illinoisans shared his goal. Instead, while many of them conceded that slavery was morally and ideologically wrong, few residents of the state were willing to sacrifice their own economic interest and social standing within the community to oppose slavery and promote racial equality. Instead, they demanded that the region's political leaders explain how the inclusion or exclusion of slavery would serve their best interests and cared little for the consequences such developments would have on their black
neighbors.

As they attempted to respond to the demands of the electorate, Coles and the political leaders on either side of the debate contributed to the region's transformation from a deferential to a participant political culture. They fostered the development of grass-roots organizations, gained control of various newspapers, and produced and distributed literature advocating their cause. More than anything, however, it was the specific demands of the voters that dictated the content of the political debate and, as a result, the residents of the state became more involved in the political process than ever before. During the final months of the campaign, few leaders on either side of the contest could ignore the strong anti-black prejudices of the state's largely Southern-born small farming majority. Consequently, each side attempted to argue that their position would promote the creation of a community of prosperous white residents. While the anti-conventionists emerged victorious in August 1824, their triumph was somewhat tarnished for Coles, because, rather than abolish slavery, the anti-convention victory merely sustained the status quo, a state of affairs that allowed slavery to persist.

Coles's confrontation with democracy in Illinois caused him to re-evaluate how best to combine his principled opposition to slavery with his determination to realize a republican vision for the nation. More than anything, he learned from his experiences on the frontier that few Americans were willing to construct a community that bestowed equal status on both white and black inhabitants. Consequently, he concluded that only a pragmatic approach to the slavery issue would allow him to maintain his antislavery sensibilities while simultaneously working to ensure the preservation of a republican social
order. Disillusioned by his experiences in Illinois, Coles left the Prairie State an outspoken advocate of a moderate position that promoted gradual emancipation and colonization, a position first espoused by his mentor, Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

When he married and settled in Philadelphia in 1833, Coles encountered the first real opportunity in his life to combine his eighteenth-century understanding of republican leadership with his antislavery sensibilities. As he witnessed the increased tension between the North and South after 1840, Coles concluded that the only way to prevent Garrisonian abolitionists and Southern state’s rights advocates from destroying the Union was to remind the public of their revolutionary heritage. To that end, Coles monitored, corrected, and promoted the public representation of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and their views on the slavery issue. More than anything, he sought to convince his audience that the founding generation were really antislavery statesmen who would disapprove of the polarizing positions dominating the public debate. He claimed that men like Jefferson and Madison would have preferred the nation’s leaders to pursue a more moderate approach that promoted the gradual emancipation and colonization. To his dismay, few Americans seemed to agree with his understanding of the revolutionary legacy and instead promoted the interests of their section of the good of the nation.

Edward Coles witnessed firsthand America’s transformation from a hierarchical deferential society to a more democratic egalitarian social order. In the decades following the American Revolution, Americans enjoyed unprecedented economic opportunity, participated in a more democratic political culture, and sought to improve their
communities through social reform. Like many of his contemporaries, Coles benefitted financially from the new opportunities produced by westward expansion and the development of a market economy. He also gained political power, even if only temporarily, as a result of the emergence of a participant political culture that rewarded political aspirants who expressed agreeable views on the important issues of the day. Yet, his confrontation with democracy led Coles to reconsider the ideals that had inspired him to abandon his native state and slavery for a life on the frontier where free labor was supposed to dominate. Once he attempted to apply the ideals he had absorbed in college, Coles learned that a more pragmatic approach to the slavery issue was required if the republican social order he cherished and felt duty-bound to protect was to persist. To his dismay, the eighteenth-century pragmatism he advocated during the last decades of his life failed to resonate with the public and the Union he devoted his life to preserving erupted into civil war.

Although he embraced and benefitted from the opportunities that defined the Antebellum era, then, Coles was never completely at ease with the erosion of influence that accompanied those changes. Forced to continually redefine his claim to authority throughout his life, Coles transformed himself from a slaveholding member of the Virginia gentry into an antislavery frontier politician, and, finally, into an urban capitalist committed to the veneration of the republican legacy. Whether exhibited through his idealistic determination to oppose the institution of slavery or by a more pragmatic approach that embraced gradualism and colonization, Coles consistently celebrated his commitment to the republican ideals that inspired the American Revolution and sought to employ them as
a remedy for the democratic impulses they spawned. Although his understanding of the
meaning of the revolutionary legacy was decidedly out of step with the type of society
America had become by the 1860s, Coles's determination to bequeath to his son the most
visible symbols of the nation's revolutionary heritage revealed just how devoted he was to
his own image as member of the first generation to inherit the ideals of the American
Revolution.

To a large degree, Edward Coles was successful at maintaining his reputation as an
enlightened gentleman of republican sensibility. Within a few days of his death, obituaries
began appearing in newspapers in both Philadelphia and Richmond. While they contained
similar, and often incorrect, information, the death notices memorialized Coles as he
would have preferred to be remembered. In both cities, for example, the editors
represented him as "a venerable and distinguished Virginian," who was "a gentleman by
birth and education" and lamented that he was among "a class now unhappily very small in
Virginia." Additionally, nearly every notice of his passing recorded his "confidential"
friendship and "intimate personal association" with Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and
James Monroe, declaring that he "enjoyed to a greater extent than almost any other
Virginian the confidence and affectionate esteem of the 'Virginia Presidents.'" While they
also informed their audiences that Coles was "an earnest and conscientious opponent of
slavery" who liberated his own enslaved laborers, the editors thought the one-time
governor of Illinois should be remembered as a "trusted repository" of information
regarding the founding generation and celebrated as "one of the few remaining connecting
links between the political past and present history of the United States.”  

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