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“Mere Supplicants at the Gate”:

Northeast Tennessee Politics in the Antebellum Era

A thesis

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by

O.J. Early

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ABSTRACT

“Mere Supplicants at the Gate”:

Northeast Tennessee Politics in the Antebellum Era

by

O.J. Early

Antebellum political historians have long studied the era between Andrew Jackson’s election and the secession crisis through the colored knowledge of the Civil War. This project is an effort to reverse that trend. It explores northeast Tennessee’s political culture from the late 1830s through the start of the Civil War. It reveals that the Second American Party System, a wave of new enfranchised voters, and the area’s demographics mixed together to lay a foundation for the aggressive and populist political style that permeated the region from the 1830s through the 1850s. At the heart of these issues was the transition of power from East Tennessee to Middle Tennessee. As a way to analyze the region’s political culture, I look specifically at Democrats Andrew Johnson and Landon Carter Haynes and Whigs William Brownlow and Thomas Nelson.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

William G. Brownlow had finally had enough of Congressman Andrew Johnson's political antics, so the fiery newspaper editor challenged the Democrat for the state's First District Congressional seat in 1845. For the former Greeneville tailor, the election proved the "bitterest race of his Congressional career."¹ Continuing as they had done for nearly a dozen years—and as they would continue to do until the secession crisis in 1860—the two men assailed one another. Johnson called Brownlow a "vile miscreant" and a "brute in human form."² Johnson, dubbed "Toady Andy" in the pages of "Parson" Brownlow's *Jonesborough Whig*, was "a contemptible political prostitute" and a "disgrace to patriotic Tennessee."³ Johnson won the election by more than 1,000 votes. The mutual attacks, however, did not cease. The vitriolic 1845 campaign for northeast Tennessee's Congressional seat was not an aberration, as subsequent years of intense political bickering amongst the region's leaders demonstrated.⁴ The Second American Party System, with all its changes to campaign practices, mixed with the region's demographics to lay a firm foundation for the aggressive and populist political style that permeated the area from the 1830s through the 1850s.

¹ "To the Freemen of the First Congressional District of Tennessee," Oct. 15, 1845, Andrew Johnson Papers, 1:123-124. Because so much of the published works on Johnson deal with his roles during the sectional crisis in 1860-61, the two unpublished collections of the Johnson Papers, as well as Robert W. Winston's, *Andrew Johnson: Plebeian and Patriot* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), are the definitive sources on Johnson's antebellum career.

² Johnson to Blackston McDannell, Oct. 15, 1845, quoted in Robert W. Winston, *Andrew Johnson: Plebeian and Patriot* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), 65-66.

³ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, October 13, 1841.

⁴ This study defines northeast Tennessee as the eight counties that have historically constituted the First Congressional District: Carter, Cocke, Greene, Hawkins, Jefferson, Johnson, Sullivan, and Washington. This area encompasses what would eventually include Hamblen and Unicoi Counties. Both formed after the Civil War.

Historians who have studied the antebellum period have done so primarily through the colored knowledge of the Civil War. Too often, scholars have allowed the political characteristics of a region during the war to serve as evidence for what happened in the antebellum period. Despite a flurry of excellent studies that demonstrate the divisive sectional nature of politics in the years that followed the War of 1812, there remain an insufficient number of in-depth studies of antebellum political culture. That is especially true in sub-regions of the South, such as Appalachian northeast Tennessee, where historians have allowed the region's pro-Union stand during the secession crisis to shape their interpretations of the preceding decades. Even scholars of nineteenth-century East Tennessee tend to give Knoxville and Chattanooga special attention, often at the expense of the state's First Congressional District. Few works delve into the style of politics that existed in Tennessee's eight northeastern counties during the years prior to the Civil War.

While historians have largely ignored northeast Tennessee during the antebellum period, scholars have shed considerable light on second-party system politics elsewhere. A reading of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Age of Jackson* paints a clear but outdated picture of Jackson and his allies as championing the "common man." To Schlesinger, Democrats were democracy personified while Whigs were hardened elites that foreshadowed the political alliance that produced Herbert Hoover and twentieth-century Republicans.⁵ Writing political history in the mid 1980s, a time when social and culture studies overshadowed the discipline, Daniel Walker Howe offered the first real intellectual challenge to Schlesinger's 1945 work. In *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*, Howe recast Whigs as a convincing alternative to the Democratic policies of the day. He pegged Whigs pro-business, "sober, industrious, thrifty

⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1945), 11-14.

people.”⁶ Conversely, Howe viewed the Jacksonian Democrats as anti-capitalists standing in the way of progress.⁷ Michael Holt’s detailed study of the Whig Party and nineteenth-century political culture further revised our understanding of the Whigs. In Holt’s eyes, “Democrats were a coalition of those still outside the market economy who feared its spread and those who had experienced and been victimized by market mechanisms.”⁸ “Whigs, in contrast,” Holt argued, “attracted those who wanted to expand the market sector because they had already enjoyed its benefits or hoped to do so in the future.”⁹

The second party system established two well-organized and cohesive political parties for the first time in U.S. history. The two parties that dominated American politics from the late 1820s through the mid 1850s ended both the first party system and the so-called “Era of Good Feelings.” Federalists, believers in a strong national government, dominated national politics through the 1790s. Democratic-Republicans, led primarily by Thomas Jefferson, emerged victorious in 1800. Jefferson supported a weaker national government and believed agriculture, not manufacturing, would be the key to American success. Republicans dominated for a decade, but factions eventually developed. These cliques ultimately evolved into the two parties that defined the second party system. According to historian David Potter, this party system served to “mediate the rivalries, antagonisms, and conflicts within the society and to resolve them in such a way that conflict would not reach the level of large-scale violence.”¹⁰ Two-party politics matured amidst a barrage of economic problems in the 1830s; a weak economy generated public

⁶ Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 32-36.

⁷ Howe, *The Political Culture*, 36.

⁸ Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 115.

⁹ Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 115.

¹⁰ David M. Potter, “Roy F. Nichols and Rehabilitation of American Political History,” in Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., *History and American Society: Essays of David M. Potter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 210.

unease and provided fodder to both Whigs and Democrats who claimed the ability to heal the nation's financial ills. As historian Daniel Crofts put it, "the pace of social and economic change divided those who welcome change from those who feared it."¹¹ The second party system generated party loyalty, helping to temporarily suppress mounting sectional tension as the nation grew more heterogeneous.

Antebellum southern political historians argue that the second party system also functioned to avert political clashes between slave owners and non-slave owners.¹² William J. Cooper, Jr. asserted that Democrats and Whigs in the Old South softened arguments over slavery because a divided South meant a more powerful North. White southern voters came to see their respective party, Whig or Democratic, as the guardians of slavery and southern interests. Ultimately, national party leaders failed to keep the slavery question out of politics after the Mexican War created thousands of miles of land for Americans to resettle. The political system that had "dampened smoldering sectional conflict," wrote scholar Michael Perman, started to "fan the fire until it exploded into open warfare."¹³

Numerous other histories demonstrate the controversial nature of the pre-Civil War years, and most political historians focus on the centrality of slavery to the Civil War. James McPherson declared that "everything stemmed from the slavery issue" during the twenty years that preceded the Civil War.¹⁴ Potter wrote extensively about the outcome of the Mexican-American War, arguing that debates over slavery's expansion into the roughly 700,000 miles of

¹¹ Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1989), 25.

¹² William J. Cooper, Jr., *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), xiii.

¹³ Michael Perman, *In Pursuit of Unity: A Political History of the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 122.

¹⁴ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 21.

ceded Mexican territory “polarized Americans and embittered political debate for the next dozen years.”¹⁵ In his second inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln said that slavery was somehow the cause of the Civil War. Eric Foner skillfully divided the “somehow” interpretations among scholars into two broad categories. Most historians fall into the first school that views the war as the result of an uncontrollable conflict between two societies with mismatched values. The other sect sees a cohort of ineffectual political leaders foolishly bringing on an avoidable war.¹⁶ A leader of the “Blundering Generation” school, Holt criticized the historians who contend “that sectional conflict over slavery and slavery extension caused the Civil War” by arguing instead that officeholders exploited the slavery question to advance their own causes.¹⁷ As an example, Holt critiqued New York’s Hardshell Hunker for his conduct during the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act. Holt accused Hunker of exploiting the slave issue by punishing intra-party rivals. He demanded all Democrats seeking Senate confirmation declare that the popular sovereignty provisions of the Compromise of 1850 “applied to all federal territories”; if Democrats did not, Hunker worked to see their confirmations denied.¹⁸ These arguments have been at the core of antebellum political discourse for decades.

Tennessee political historians have focused primarily on the competition between Whigs and Democrats during the antebellum era. Writing in the 1940s about the state of Tennessee politics, political scientist V.O. Key, Jr. proclaimed that Republicanism in East Tennessee began in the 1850s and 1860s. “Tennessee’s Democratic-Republican cleavage stands as a monument to

¹⁵ David M Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), xvii.

¹⁶ Eric Foner, “Lincoln’s Interpretation of the Civil War,” The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed January 28, 2016, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/american-civil-war/essays/lincoln%E2%80%99s-interpretation-civil-war>.

¹⁷ Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 3.

¹⁸ Michael F. Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p. 11

the animosities of Civil War and Reconstruction,” Key wrote.¹⁹ East Tennesseans had a “sense of separatism” from Middle and West Tennessee, and the “dispute over slavery and secession . . . forged Tennessee partisan alignments into a form that has persisted to this day.” Historians wrote about the change in political loyalty based on party rather than personal rivalries, a major development in Volunteer State politics. After absorbing a series of losses to Whig opponents dating back to the late 1830s, Democrats emerged as the state’s dominant party by the 1850s. According to Paul Bergeron, the Whig movement “became the bona fide, loyal and noisy opposition party, compelling the Democrats to fight diligently to maintain a high level of competitiveness.”²⁰

Over the last thirty years, historians turned their attention to previously neglected sections of the South such as Appalachia. John C. Inscoe challenged a wide range of assumptions about western North Carolina in *Mountain Masters: Slavery, and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina*. Backward, isolated mountain folk did not shape the state’s western counties; risk-taking white men and women did, generating an economy linked to the Lower South. Despite only 10% of the white population owning slaves by the Civil War, non-slave owners defended the peculiar institution because they profited from the financial connection to the Deep South.²¹ Inscoe found slave owners and non-slave owners united in opposition toward state government for a lack of internal improvement funding, and western North Carolinians elected a disproportionate amount of slaveholders to office. Inscoe dubbed these men “mountain masters,” highland elite whose professional involvement in mountain communities ran deep. They were

¹⁹ V.O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1949), 102, was a pioneering study of voting behaviors in single regions; Key, *Southern Politics*, 103.

²⁰ Paul H. Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics in Tennessee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 65. Bergeron offers the most in-depth account of Tennessee politics between the Jacksonian Era and Abraham Lincoln’s election.

²¹ John C. Inscoe, *Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), xvi-3.

lawyers, physicians, and merchants. Voters afforded these elites a measure of deference, thus stimulating the lower classes behind their pro-slavery agenda. Kenneth Noe's *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis* similarly argues that southwest Virginia did not resist the market economy. Energy marked the area's economic development, with slaves comprising a growing percentage of the region's population in the 1850s.²² These scholars are indispensable in helping historians understand why western North Carolina and southwest Virginia choose secession and the Confederacy. Both works highlight important antebellum issues, such as ad valorem taxation, a toll levied based on the worth of a transaction or property.²³ Still, while these authors address the antebellum era, their focus remains on the sectional crisis.

For all its similarities to western North Carolina and southwest Virginia, northeast Tennessee followed a much different path to the Civil War. Unlike western North Carolina, where the influence of elite slave owners and connection to the southern plantation economy helped lead to secession, class divisions, anti-planter feelings, financial links to northern cities such as Cincinnati, and a present but relatively uninfluential economic connection to the Deep South, led to strong Unionist sentiments in northeast Tennessee.²⁴ Rather than continuing to hash out northeast Tennessee's brand of Unionism, historians may gain from a fresh study of northeast Tennessee's political style in the wake of Andrew Jackson and the sweeping changes to the nation's political structure in the 1830s. Of course, Unionism cannot be ignored. For much of the region, Unionism was the climactic conclusion to a forty-year period of contentious, party-

²² Kenneth W. Noe, *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 5-8.

²³ Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics*, 72.

²⁴ W. Todd Groce, *Mountain Rebels: East Tennessee Confederates and the Civil War, 1860-1870* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 12-14.

based politics. But Civil War Unionism is still just one major piece of a much larger political puzzle, and historians' obsession with the secession crisis came at the high cost of important questions about northeast Tennessee's antebellum political culture. How did significant nationwide changes to campaign tactics in the 1830s affect politicking in northeast Tennessee? Why did populist-style campaigning work so well in the region? How did the region's political history shape campaigns in the 1840s and 1850s?

Johnson and Brownlow, two of the region's most powerful leaders, waged populist campaigns throughout the antebellum era. Along with Landon Carter Haynes, Thomas Nelson, and others, they were major players in a political culture shaped by demographics, larger-than-life political egos, and isolation to a single congressional district. Grounded in economic appeals, their brand of populism targeted social and financial elites. Nineteenth-century populism, as historian Michael Kazin defined it, was "a flexible mode of persuasion ... a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bound narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter."²⁵ Despite their bitter rivalry, Johnson and Brownlow often deployed nearly identical rhetoric in pursuit of northeast Tennesseans' political support. Such similarity suggests why they were each other's arch nemesis at various times during the antebellum era. That constituents embraced, supported, and followed these agitating rabble-rousers reveals much about the region's political culture.

This work seeks to ground northeast Tennessee antebellum politics in the region's demographics and the advent of the two-party system. Historian Noel Fisher painted a broad picture when he wrote that "by many measures the economic structure of rural East Tennessee

²⁵ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 15.

differed little from that of the rest of the state.”²⁶ A demographic profile of the First Congressional District, an often ignored sliver of the eastern Grand Division, offers a far different conclusion. Sharp economic contrasts existed between northeast Tennessee and the rest of the state and the South by the middle half of the antebellum era. In 1840, aggregate wealth per capita was only \$454 in northeast Tennessee.²⁷ By contrast, the numbers were \$934 and \$1,243 in Middle and West Tennessee, respectively. Historians have rightly cautioned the interpretation of per capita wealth, noting that such a figure encompasses many factors, including land values and agricultural potential.²⁸ Wealth closely followed slave ownership in the antebellum South. Here, too, the disparity remained high between northeast Tennessee and the rest of the state. Among Carter, Cocke, Greene, Hawkins, Jefferson, Johnson, Sullivan, and Washington counties, slaves comprised only 6% of the population in 1840. Statewide, the figure was 22%.²⁹ In 1850, the gap was 9.8% to 24%, respectively; in 1860, the discrepancy grew to 8.6% to 25%.³⁰

A closer look indicates additional disadvantages. In 1840, census officials tagged 178 northeast Tennesseans working in “learned professions,” a category that encompassed engineers, lawyers, and doctors. The regional average was about 22 men per county; statewide, the average was nearly 30 per county.³¹ Percentage wise, northeast Tennessee was on par with the rest of the

²⁶ Noel Fisher, *War at Every Door: Partisan Politics and Guerrilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1860-1869* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 22.

²⁷ 1840 US Census Bureau, *Statistics*, 66-68.

²⁸ Wilma A. Dunaway, *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 5-8. Dunaway argues that capitalism came to southern Appalachia before the Civil War, not after. This brand of antebellum Appalachian capitalism generated a “landless semi-proletariat of coerced workers” that included slaves, Cherokee Indians, and tenant farmers. Paul Salstrom, *Appalachia’s Path to Dependency, Rethinking a Region’s Economic History, 1730-1940* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 2-3. Salstrom proclaims a wide variety of factors, including limited population growth, nationwide industrialization, and federal intervention, all served to leave Appalachia economically disadvantaged.

²⁹ 1840 US Census Bureau, *Statistics*, 70.

³⁰ 1850 U.S. census, slave population, University of Virginia’s Historical Census Browser, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php>; 1860 U.S. census, slave population, University of Virginia’s Historical Census Browser, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php>

³¹ 1840 US Census Bureau, *Statistics*, 71.

state in the number of primary or common schools. Northeast Tennessee, however, contained less qualified teachers. In 1840, there were 336 “scholars” in local schools, an average of 42 per county, compared to an average of 50 in counties outside the region. Of the state’s 25,090 scholars, only 2,693 were in northeast Tennessee. Also in 1840, 9% of the white population aged 20 and up in northeast Tennessee could not read or write, compared to 7% in the rest of the state.³² The economic incongruity between the eight counties in the state’s northeastern edge only grew in the years preceding the Civil War. By 1860, northeast Tennesseans commanded less land and farm values than their counterparts in Middle and West Tennessee.³³ The percentage of improved acreage, a census category that measured enhancements to farmland, hovered under 30% in northeast Tennessee; though not a huge disparity, it topped 33% in the middle and western portions of the state.³⁴

Demographics reveal a sizeable class of poor farmers and wage earners in northeast Tennessee. During the 1840 census, nearly 60% of the white male population found employment in agriculture as day or farm laborers, commerce, or manufacturing. In a region ill-suited for cotton, northeast Tennessee farmers turned to livestock and cereal grains. All but one of the counties devoted the bulk of their agriculture to oats; Sullivan County was the exception in 1840, raising more bushels of wheat than bushels of oats.³⁵ Northeast Tennessee farmers invested modestly in pigs and poultry, and the region employed 41 of the 115 people working in brick and lime. The monetary gains were usually minimal in the few industries where the region surpassed the rest of East Tennessee. Of the 323,897 pounds of soap generated in East Tennessee, Greene,

³² 1840 U.S. census, whites ages 20 and up who cannot read and write, p. 268 (stamped), University of Virginia’s Historical Census Browser, accessed January 21, 2016, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php>.

³³ 1860 U.S. census, Tennessee, population schedule, p. 260 (stamped), University of Virginia’s Historical Census Browser, accessed January 20, 2016, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php>.

³⁴ 1860 US Census Bureau, Statistics, 71.

³⁵ 1840 US Census Bureau, Statistics, 251.

Hawkins, and Jefferson Counties produced 212,270 pounds, 66% of the East Tennessee total. An absence of large-scale planters did not, however, mean a lack of social classes. In Greene County, 40% of adult white males worked as farmers or “mechanics,” a catchall term for non-farming laborers such as tailors and blacksmiths; only 32—less than 1%—were lawyers, physicians, or engineers.³⁶ It was similar in Washington County, where the disparity between farmers and mechanics to lawyers, physicians, and engineers was 61% to 1%, respectively.³⁷ That is not to suggest that farm and wage laborers were absent in other parts of the state. They just made up a smaller percentage of the populace. In Knox County, the largest county in East Tennessee, white men working in agriculture and commerce encompassed just under 25% of the people; statewide, farmers and commerce workers tallied 27% of the total population.³⁸ A more in-depth 1850 census reveals farm values comparable to large counties in eastern Tennessee but far less than counties in Middle and West Tennessee. Farms in the First District were worth an average \$1,348 in 1850. In Knox County, the average farm valued at \$1,335. Farms near Nashville, however, were worth \$4,779; in Shelby County, the average farm tallied a net worth of \$9,872.³⁹ In northeast Tennessee, yeoman farmers comprised the majority of a region that held few plantations in spite of its small if not wealthy elite.

The region’s poorer-than-the-rest-of-the-state status came amid sectional tensions with Middle and West Tennessee. The competition among Tennessee’s Grand Divisions began not long after the state’s inception in 1796, as the state’s three sections battled each other for political dominance and internal improvements funding. As Bergeron demonstrated, politics in

³⁶ 1840 US Census Bureau, Statistics, 71.

³⁷ 1840 US Census Bureau, Statistics, 71.

³⁸ 1840 U.S. census, population schedule, p. 268 (stamped), University of Virginia’s Historical Census Browser, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/state.php> .

³⁹ 1840 U.S. census, total number of farms, p. 272 (stamped), University of Virginia’s Historical Census Browser, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php>.

the Volunteer State revolved around personal rivalries rather than party before the mid 1830s. John Sevier, governor from 1803 to 1809, led one faction, while William Blount, a U.S. Senator in the late 1790s, headed the other. Writing about the Sevier-Blount rivalry, Bergeron declared, “at most, they tolerated each other when it was politically expedient, but generally their well-known mutual hostility shaped and informed politics throughout the state.”⁴⁰ The enmity between Sevier and Blount set the stage for sectional tension: a majority of East Tennesseans backed Sevier, their adopted son, while Blount found the bulk of his support in Middle Tennessee.⁴¹

From 1796 until the second decade of the nineteenth-century, East Tennessee was home to most of the state’s governors. The region also controlled the state legislature and monopolized one of the state’s two senate seats. The area’s fortunes changed significantly by the 1810s. Fueled by rapid population growth, congressional redistricting gave Middle Tennessee increased political representation.⁴² The removal of the state capitol from Knoxville to Nashville was perhaps the clearest symbol that the seat of political power no longer belonged to East Tennessee. In the late 1830s, as party replaced faction in Tennessee politics, Middle Tennessee legislators blocked multiple bills that would have funded railroads and road projects in East Tennessee.⁴³

The transition of power was not uncontested. In the early 1840s, Johnson led a movement to separate East Tennessee from the state. Brownlow and Nelson blasted the Middle Tennessee “aristocracy” from 1840 until the Civil War, and Haynes lobbied the General Assembly for more internal improvement monies for Washington and surrounding counties. The shift in power had

⁴⁰ Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics*, 6.

⁴¹ Fisher, *War at Every Door*, 13.

⁴² Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics*, 43.

⁴³ Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics*, 50.

other effects, too. It left northeast Tennessee politicians to battle for far fewer offices. Middle Tennessee wielding more power did not prevent politicians from the state's northeastern edge from seeking higher office. But it did radically diminish their chances for success. For example, Johnson was the only candidate from the eastern counties elected governor from 1819 until the secession crisis, a more than 40-year period. The First District Congressional seat became the top prize in a region whose men once dominated the governorship.

In this thesis, I analyze three areas of antebellum politics in northeast Tennessee. The first portion examines the development of campaign style and techniques during the late 1830s through the late 1840s. Next, the focus shifts to the fiery nature of politics in the region during the 1840s. A demographic profile of the counties in the first district suggests that a lack of wealth, education, and plantation economics generated conditions where populist politics could thrive. Finally, this work evaluates the ways in which northeast Tennessee leaders responded to well-proven issues of inferiority and tension with Middle and West Tennessee in light of the previous two sections.

In this project, I adopt the views espoused by historians Eric Foner, James McPherson, and Richard Sewell that the nation's antebellum political system functioned "as a mechanism for relieving social tensions, ordering group conflict, and integrating the society"; that by the 1830s and 1840s, organized political parties energized voter participation like never before; and that, in both the North and the South, "party competition inadvertently gave rise to sectional agitators who increasingly forced public opinion—and hence government—to confront the issue of slavery."⁴⁴ Like these historians, I place slavery at the center of the Civil War. This perspective may be viewed in contrast to the "new political history," promoted by Michael Holt and others,

⁴⁴ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 52.

that emphasized politics' social basis. These historians argue that antebellum politics orbited around conflicts, such as spats between Catholics and Protestants and natives and immigrants. "Passions fired by these causes were more significant than differences over slavery," wrote one historian, and "broadly speaking, it might be said that for these scholars the Civil War became just one event in the ... more important story of the modernization of American society."⁴⁵

Methodologically, I rely on newspaper articles and campaign documents. I also examine campaign speeches, and excerpts from several political rallies. While private letters reveal northeast Tennessee's political leaders' motives and strategies, I place a premium on their constructed public personas. I use these sources as a way to gauge how northeast Tennessee leaders sought to define themselves in the public eye. I look specifically at Democrats Andrew Johnson and Landon Carter Haynes and Whigs William Brownlow and Thomas Nelson. It seems proper to give these men special attention because of their profound influence over regional politics. All of them operated in Greene and Washington Counties—the bellweather of the First Congressional District. Between 1841 and 1861, four of the six men elected to Congress hailed from either Greene or Washington County. Brownlow moved his paper to Knoxville in 1849, but the vitriolic editor maintained a strong influence over the whole region. Greeneville was the second largest town in the district by 1840 while Jonesborough was home to two of the region's three weekly newspapers from 1840 to 1849.

A brief profile of Brownlow, Haynes, Johnson, and Nelson, reveal that while each man campaigned, wrote, and spoke like populists all lived well above the economic norm of most northeast Tennesseans. Brownlow rode the ministry circuit for a decade, but by 1839 he operated a modestly successful newspaper. He owned a home and employed at least two servants, and

⁴⁵ Francis G. Couvares et al, *Interpretations of American History: Patterns & Perspectives* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 351.

possibly owned two slaves.⁴⁶ By the start of the Civil War, Brownlow had moved his paper to Knoxville, the largest town in the region, where he enjoyed a circulation of around 11,000. That made the *Whig* the mostly widely read newspaper in East Tennessee. Nelson, an ardent Whig and good friend to Brownlow, found prestige as an attorney. Nelson moved to “Buckhorn,” a former inn, in the late 1830s. It was an elegant home, one of the largest in Washington County; he owned four slaves and was “a recognized member of the Washington County aristocracy.”⁴⁷ As a young man, he confided in friends and relatives about his plain country neighbors, especially the opposite sex. “There is an extremely great destitution of young ladies; not that there are no females, but that there are no girls here, whose intelligence and acquirements, or personal formation, would entitle them to the appellation of beautiful,” he wrote.⁴⁸ “But if an assortment of ugly, illiterate, simply, and foolish ladies was requisite I would point the inquirer to no other place than Carter County.”⁴⁹

Landon Haynes, who frequently used his initials “L.C.,” graduated from Washington Academy in 1838 and obtained the John Tipton farm in 1839. He practiced law under Thomas Nelson, arguing cases in virtually every northeast Tennessee county during the antebellum period. He was the top editor at the pro-Democrat *Tennessee Sentinel* for nine years.⁵⁰ Writing years after the Civil War, Whig Oliver Temple declared Haynes “one of the finest Democratic orators in the State.”⁵¹ He owned two slaves in 1840. As for Johnson, the “mechanic” may have

⁴⁶ Oliver Temple, *Notable Men of Tennessee* (New York: The Cosmopolitan Press, 1912), 289. Temple wrote that Brownlow “was not a slave owner.” Steve Humphrey, *That D---d Brownlow”: Being a Saucy and Malicious Description of Fighting Parson William Gannaway Brownlow* (Boone: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978), 264. Humphrey argues the evidence is “conclusive” that Brownlow owned two slaves by the eve of the Civil War. The 1840 census lists two servants living in Brownlow’s household. Census records do not indicate that Brownlow owned slaves.

⁴⁷ Bellamy, “The Political Career of Landon Carter Haynes,” 15.

⁴⁸ Nelson to “Cousin,” November 1828, Thomas Nelson Papers.

⁴⁹ Nelson to “Cousin,” November 1828, Thomas Nelson Papers.

⁵⁰ Bellamy, “The Political Career of Landon Carter Haynes,” 6.

⁵¹ Temple, *Notable Men*, 168.

championed the cause of poor whites in the late 1820s, but he was a respected resident of Greeneville, the district's second largest town, by the late 1830s. Elected mayor in 1834, he served two terms as a state legislator. He purchased his first slave, a fourteen-year-old named Dolly, for \$500 in 1842. His business was prospering and he owned two slaves by the time he was elected to Congress in 1843.⁵²

These men entered the political arena as politics nationwide underwent major changes. The electorate greatly expanded by the middle half of the antebellum era. In the 1830s, the franchise extended to almost all white males while only Rhode Island, Virginia, and Louisiana kept a property qualification. In northeast Tennessee, voter turnout increased massively from 1836 to 1840, moving from 55.2% to 81%.⁵³ Voter turnout nationwide moved from 1.5 million in 1836 to 2.4 million in 1840, a nearly 30% increase.⁵⁴ Politicians adjusted quickly to the larger electorate, ushering dramatic modifications to United States political culture. Parades, slogans, and stump speeches became the norm in campaigns, “and both parties were engaging in the hoopla ... The system of electoral politics that had been emerging since 1828 had reached fruition,” wrote historian Michael Perman, “with parties competing vigorously across the nation and voters turning out in unprecedented numbers on election day.”⁵⁵ It was in this environment that Brownlow, Haynes, Johnson, and Nelson burst onto the political scene.

⁵² Eliza Johnson to Martha Patterson, Johnson Papers, 1:26.

⁵³ Election statistics are drawn from several sources. The 1835 and 1837 returns are from the *Senate Journal* (Columbia, 1835) p. 42 and the *Senate Journal* (Nashville, 1837), p. 28, respectively. The 1836 presidential returns are drawn from W. Dean Burnham, *Presidential Ballots, 1836-1892* (Baltimore, 1955), p. 742. The 1839 totals come from the *Nashville Republican Banner*, Aug. 3-12, 1839.

⁵⁴ Perman, *In Pursuit of Unity*, 75.

⁵⁵ Perman, *In Pursuit of Unity*, 76.

CHAPTER 2

‘MERE SUPPLICANTS AT THE GATE’

As Whig Ephraim H. Foster geared up for a statewide speaking tour in advance of his run for governor in 1840, Andrew Johnson received multiple letters urging him to rally East Tennessee Democrats in opposition. John S. Young, a Virginia-born physician who served as Tennessee’s secretary of state from 1839 to 1847, encouraged Johnson to mount a canvass against the former United States Senator. “I understand that Foster will visit all the counties in east tenn.—let him come,” Johnson replied, “we are ready for him, and so far as I am concerned I intend to meet him at the waters [sic] edge.”¹ After Knoxville Democrat and attorney Robert B. Reynolds asked the Greeneville politician to campaign against Foster, Johnson wrote: “I intend to meet him at the very foot of the mountain ... I say to all true democrats, as the enemy has notified you that he is going to bring war to your own country, buckle on your armor and meet him at the waters [sic] edge.”²

Much like the rest of the Upper South, a growing number of northeast Tennesseans participated in the political process by the mid 1830s. Political observers recognized the value of soapbox oratory as two-party politics matured in the Volunteer State. Citizens wrote their politicians urging for stump speeches, and state officials often reminded regional leaders of the importance of canvassing. As the electorate expanded dramatically in the late 1830s, it is difficult to overstate the significance of oratory and politicking in the antebellum South. As one writer criticized, “the South suffered from too much campaigning” and that attentiveness to

¹ Johnson to John Young, March 17, 1840, quoted in LeRoy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, eds., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson: Volume 1, 1822-1851* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1967), 28.

² Johnson to Robert P. Reynolds, April 16, 1840, quoted in Graf and Haskins, *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, 29.

politics “was as strong with the humblest citizen as with the most prominent; the joint debates and the oratory at militia musters and at monthly court . . . supplemented the small circulation of the press and the inability of many voters to read.”³ The communal nature of the second party system captured voter intrigue, and food and music became benchmarks of local campaigns. In an era devoid of television and organized sports, politicians enjoyed unmatched opportunities to generate public enthusiasm.⁴

More than anything else, it was the fiery nature of northeast Tennessee leaders that defined the region’s politics in the antebellum era. Politicians doubled down on their rhetoric when challenged, resorted to insult often, and catered to prejudice frequently. Clashes were not strictly between parties. The wealthy Democrat Landon Carter Haynes quarreled with the self-made Johnson frequently, while Nelson and Brownlow attacked other Whigs. For all their differences—during the entire antebellum era, for example, Johnson and Brownlow never backed the same candidate in a federal, state, or local election—campaigns in northeast Tennessee looked remarkably similar in style and substance. Each man often deployed a three-pronged populist approach to woo voters: declare the people noble and able to rise economically, brand the opposition elite and undemocratic, and marshal the electorate against the callused aristocracy. A few political issues separated them. Johnson, for example, rarely ever supported government intervention to aid the regional economy, while Nelson actively campaigned for state and federal assistance. Most of the divisions, however, were personal and resulted in candidates hurling biting insults and fantastical charges at their opponents. Many of these accusations often had little or no merit, but the charges fit the region’s aggressive style. By the

³ Edward Ingle, *Southern Sidelines: A Picture of Social and Economic Life in the South a Generation Before the War* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1896), 39.

⁴ Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, 48.

1850s, northeast Tennessee leaders argued that slavery was essential for poor whites to advance economically while maintaining that African Americans were inferior to the white race.

Both Johnson's campaign panache and his clashes with the well-to-do are best understood in light of his socioeconomic background. Born December 29, 1808, to Jacob Johnson and Mary McDonough, he entered the world the son of poor whites. As Johnson later recalled, his family belonged to the "plebeian" class.⁵ After his father's death and a tailor apprenticeship, Johnson brought his family through the western North Carolina mountains to settle at Greeneville in northeast Tennessee. While he liked the community of small-scale farmers and "mechanics" in the first district's second largest town, he quickly became aware of its social classes. There was Thomas "Tom" Arnold, twice elected to Congress and selected in 1836 as a brigadier general in the Tennessee militia. Dubbed "General Arnold" by his friends, he helped establish and maintain the Whig Party in Greeneville. Also residing in Greeneville was the wealthy Dr. Alexander Williams, "the Whig boss of that entire section."⁶ As one historian observed, these Greeneville elites owned "great houses" with slave quarters, gardens and orchards.⁷ Johnson came to loathe them all.

Johnson established a few friends during his early years in Greeneville, including Blackstone McDaniel, a carpenter, John Jones, a college graduate living just outside the town, and Sam Milligan, a graduate of William and Mary College who taught courses in Greeneville. These men spent hours talking politics and blasting what they saw as an economy rigged to help the rich.⁸ Milligan sharpened and honed Johnson's oratory skills, making the tailor something of a legend at the local college. Between 1827 and 1840, Johnson accumulated a home, a tailor

⁵ Winston, *Andrew Johnson*, 24.

⁶ Winston, *Andrew Johnson*, 26.

⁷ Winston, *Andrew Johnson*, 28.

⁸ Winston, *Andrew Johnson*, 29.

shop, a brick store and a more than 100-acre farm—far more than most northeast Tennesseans had. He was elected alderman and mayor, and his influence grew steadily over Greeneville politics. Johnson went to work for the Democratic Party and the so-called working class when he reached the state legislature 1839.⁹ He offered support to President Martin Van Buren’s administration and stern opposition to the reestablishment of the Bank of the United States. A disciple of Andrew Jackson long after Old Hickory’s perceived usurpation of presidential power left a bitter taste with Whig-leaning East Tennesseans, Johnson was unreceptive to legislation that hinted at favoritism toward banks and corporations in Tennessee. He refused to support a proposal for a Board of Bank Commissioners “with salaries for the people to pay.”¹⁰

With a pragmatic eye toward ascending higher office, Johnson sensed that the time had come to assemble a powerful Democratic machine in Greene County by early 1840. The campaign model he constructed served him throughout the antebellum period.¹¹ First, Johnson announced a public meeting and sent “runners” throughout the county to alert the Democratic base.¹² Johnson’s listeners came from miles away, some walking, others arriving on horseback and in wagons. The local sheriff held up signs that communicated to the audience when to laugh, applaud, and shout as Johnson spoke for two to three hours.¹³ The county clerk, George W. Foute, commenced the meeting by reading aloud resolutions prepared by Johnson. The resolutions reaffirmed Jackson’s hostility toward the Bank of the United States. Like Jackson,

⁹ 1840 U.S. census, Greene County, Tennessee, population schedule, p. 52 (stamped), University of Virginia’s Historical Census Browser, accessed January 20, 2016, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/start.php?year=V1840>. It does not appear that Johnson ever defined the working class in northeast Tennessee. He spoke frequently about “mechanics” and farmers, a sect of the populace that made up nearly 20 percent of the free white population in Greene County.

¹⁰ Hans L. Trefousse, *Andrew Johnson: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 41.

¹¹ Temple, *Notable Men*, 52, wrote that Andrew Johnson’s canvasses throughout the 1840s and 1850s mirrored his spring 1840 rally in Greeneville. Trefousse, *Andrew Johnson*, 24, suggested the same.

¹² Temple, *Notable Men*, 53.

¹³ Temple, *Notable Men*, 53.

Johnson shared disaffection for a powerful central bank. He believed such an institution favored the wealthy, and he argued that white middle class men should have easy access to credit.¹⁴

Like many of Johnson's antebellum stump speeches, only excerpts remain. At this spring 1840 rally, he bashed John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, and local Whigs. Similar to other Jacksonian Democrats, Johnson declared Whigs as non-democratic aristocrats who sought to gobble up the country's wealth for themselves. Whigs, he told his listeners, were "successors to the hated Federalists who hung out blue lights to the enemy, and in 1812 tried to put an end to the war by the Hartford Secession Convention."¹⁵ Johnson evoked class hostility by tying Whigs to the former Federalists, positioning himself on the side of the working masses. "Whiggery," he said, meant a caste system with aristocrats at the top and the common man at the bottom. Whigs were not carriers of progress, he asserted, but rather money-hungry "antirepublican monsters" that would corrupt American government. Johnson saw the Bank of the United States, the "monster bank" as he dubbed it, the chief threat to freedom and liberty. Johnson's echoed one of Jackson's veto messages, proclaiming the bank a "privileged monopoly" formed to make "rich men richer."¹⁶ His hatred of the bank exposed his feelings on race and nationalism. He distrusted the foreign-born members of the bank board, arguing that the bank could never be reliable in a time of war. In all his pro-working class rhetoric, Johnson's personal life was intimately wed with his politics. His born-in-poverty biography mattered, and all accounts suggest that Johnson genuinely hated the northeast Tennessee elite. "Eternal vigilance was the price of liberty," Johnson thundered, and "power was always stealing from the many to give to the few."¹⁷

¹⁴ Temple, *Notable Men*, 54.

¹⁵ Temple, *Notable Men*, 53.

¹⁶ Temple, *Notable Men*, 54.

¹⁷ Temple, *Notable Men*, 53.

Even if some of Johnson's listeners were not farmers, virtually everyone in attendance knew something of farm life. Having cast his audience as hard workers who must take what they need from the powerful, he plunged into rhetoric that everyone would understand: he talked about the farm. A young Oliver Temple, a Whig politico who observed the speech with a critical eye, noted that Johnson "wound up by the use of a figure drawn from the road, exhorting the party in an impassioned appeal to stand together 'hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, foot to foot, and to make a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull altogether.'" Temple dubbed this a "delicate allusion" to the "custom among the wagoners of that day of doubling teams, and assisting one another out of mudholes by all lending a helping hand in pushing and pull-ing." According to Temple, Johnson's appeal "set the old wagoners wild with delight."¹⁸ No counterarguments sprung from Johnson's speech, nor did he deviate much from attacking Whig rivals. He rallied the Democratic faithful against Whigs and appealed to farmers, a large chunk of the Democratic Party. His down-on-the-farm language worked, according to Temple: "The crowd became tumultuous. Its hurrahs were like the sound of many waters. The din and uproar became almost infernal."¹⁹ He mobilized support by telling his followers they could rise and by labeling his opponents uncaring well-to-dos. Not unlike Deep South Democrats, Johnson unleashed southern-style rhetoric about poor whites rising to the middle class.

Other political leaders across the region followed a model similar to Johnson and his Democratic allies in 1840. Indeed, it appears Thomas Nelson adopted some of Johnson's tactics after the tailor-turned-politician proved ultra-effective. Whigs sponsored gatherings that resembled religious camp meetings. Such religious assemblies aimed at converting listeners through emotional appeals, and the Whig-led rallies set out to do the same. In the presidential

¹⁸ Temple, *Notable Men*, 54-55.

¹⁹ Temple, *Notable Men*, 55.

election of 1836, Whigs supplemented pro-William Henry Harrison meetings with parades, uniformed men dubbed “Harrison Guards,” and floats; campaigners wrote songs set to popular tunes.²⁰ William Brownlow, using his newspaper as the primary voice of northeast Tennessee Whigs, and Thomas A.R. Nelson, via his growing prestige as a regional attorney, stood as the recognized leaders of the Whig Party in Washington County.²¹ Nelson spoke in almost every northeast county on Harrison’s behalf. In September, Nelson addressed a convention at Cumberland Gap, praising the “common man” and blasting the “aristocratic tendencies” of Van Buren.²²

Many of Nelson’s activities resembled standard Whig behavior during the campaigns of 1840 and 1844.²³ He championed economic progress in northeast Tennessee, and he was not afraid to call for government intervention to aid commercial growth.²⁴ Nelson wanted a pottery industry in the region, and he handled stock sales with the East Tennessee Bank.²⁵ Nelson and Brownlow, though, grounded their 1840 Washington County campaign in popular appeals to voters, contrasting Harrison’s supposed sympathy for the “common man” with the alleged extravagances of the Van Buren administration. These appeals may be understood, in part, as a national reaction to Andrew Jackson’s popularity among lower-class whites. Still, Nelson

²⁰ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, October 7, 1840.

²¹ Thomas B. Alexander, *Thomas A.R. Nelson of East Tennessee* (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Commission, 1956), 25, presents Nelson and Brownlow as the established leaders of the Whig Party in Washington County. A letter written by Nelson in the *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, May 12, 1840, detailed many of Nelson’s endeavors on behalf of the party.

²² *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, September 15, 1840. There does not appear to be a report of the tristate convention at Cumberland Gap, though the *Whig* printed a letter from Nelson detailing his speech. Bergeron argued that Andrew Johnson was responsible for the steady growth of “mechanics” to the Democratic Party. See *Antebellum Politics*, 153.

²³ Holt argued that Whigs were mostly pro-business and advocated an expanding market sector. See *American Whig Party*, 21

²⁴ David C. Hsiung, *Two Worlds in the Tennessee Mountains* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 186-187. Hsiung argued that two broad outlooks permeated the region: For those linked via transportation to other towns, desire to look “beyond” East Tennessee and call for government-led economic growth, and for those in more remote areas, “a more inward-turning perspective” that distrusted outsiders and clung to agriculture.

²⁵ Ezekiel Birdseye to Nelson, August 17, 1846, in Nelson Papers; *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, January 17, 1844.

attacked Van Buren’s “aristocratic tendencies” on at least two occasions. He never publically detailed those “tendencies,” but Whigs nationwide bashed Democrats for aristocratic leanings—shorthand for power in relation to liberty—after Andrew Jackson made frequent use of the presidential veto power. It is also revealing that one of the wealthiest citizens in Washington County campaigned for the Whig presidential candidate using language that mirrored Johnson’s own class rhetoric. Nelson employed one servant in 1840, multiple day laborers by 1850, and he listed the total value of his personal property at \$10,500 during the 1850 census—the average property-owning white male commanded only \$456 under the same census category in 1850.²⁶ Nelson was also an ardent Whig—the party that, by and large, represented the wealthiest segment of America. Why a northeast Tennessee Whig would evoke class-based language to denigrate a Democrat’s “aristocratic tendencies” is best answered, perhaps, in Nelson’s understanding of the region’s demographics. Nationwide, Whigs and Democrats alike campaigned to slay the “anti-republican monsters” that threatened liberty; in northeast Tennessee, however, Whigs and Democrats entreated the middle class through claims to be the best representative of the country folk. Nelson’s interest in thwarting the aristocracy can also be taken as a trope about Deep South planters. He vilified the planter class, charging that well-off plantation owners cared little about northeast Tennessee’s economy. His language was a two-way foil while the internal improvements he championed promised to uplift a financially stricken region.

One of the biggest Whig rallies of the 1840 campaign in northeast Tennessee happened on Nelson’s Washington County property. The size and scale alone of Nelson’s elegant home set

²⁶ 1840 U.S. census, Greene County, Tennessee, population schedule, p. 52 (stamped), University of Virginia’s Historical Census Browser, accessed March 13, 2016. Nelson did not list his personal wealth in the 1840 census. However, he acquired “Buckhorn” just after the census was taken in 1840, meaning he was richer than the vast majority of northeast Tennesseans during the 1840s.

him above most northeast Tennesseans. Nelson hosted hundreds during a three-day rally that included long speeches and music in support for Harrison. Virginia Governor David Campbell, an aging Whig politician, attended. He noted his thoughts in a letter to his wife, explaining the “wonderful speeches” and “fine” music at Nelson’s “great Convention.” “Some five hundred or a thousand ladies attended each day and I suppose three or four hundred encamped on the ground during the whole time,” he wrote.²⁷ Campbell hailed the speeches of Leslie Combs, of Kentucky, and William C. Preston, of South Carolina, as the highlights. In 1844, the district chose Nelson to travel to Nashville to cast the Whig electoral vote for Henry Clay. Statewide, Whigs made a spectacle of their support for Clay; the festivities included carriages, band, and uniformed companies of Whigs in a parade through the state capital.²⁸

Events in northeast Tennessee mirrored the tactics of political leaders across the country. As one historian asked, “What reader of antebellum newspapers has not encountered rapturous accounts of the greatest mass meeting in the history of the country, at which an enlightened citizenry listen for hours with perfect attention to the declamations of visiting dignitaries?”²⁹ Politics in northeast Tennessee, however, was more than parades and catchy campaign tunes. Leaders developed a “common touch” that endeared them to the electorate.³⁰ As Johnson campaigned, he often ordered food from his constituents. Apparently, Johnson would eat or drink almost anything if he thought it would capture a vote. The “simple mechanic,” as Johnson referred to himself, became “perfectly indifferent to the quality” of meat and could consume “the

²⁷ David Campbell to Virginia Campbell, October 9, 1840, in the David Campbell Collection.

²⁸ Nelson to W.G. Brownlow, November 29, 1844, in Thomas A.R. Nelson Papers.

²⁹ Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, 48.

³⁰ Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, 26.

meanest whisky—the fifteen-cent-a-gallon variety, hot and fresh from the still, with fusil oil on it.”³¹

Many of the region’s political feuds revolved around the First District Congressional seat. For most, it was the highest attainable office after political power shifted to Middle Tennessee. Even seemingly petty arguments centered upon the district’s spot in Congress. In 1841, a quarrel between Nelson and Whig Congressman Thomas D. Arnold spilled into the public sphere after Arnold first refused to seek reelection and then declined a nomination as a Whig elector at a convention organized by Nelson. Two years earlier, Nelson accused Arnold of courting Democrats in a district-wide canvass. “At the risk of offending you,” Nelson wrote in an editorial published by Brownlow, “I must be permitted to say, as I have heretofore told you, that I do not now, and never have approved of your course in your last canvass . . . yet I have every reason to believe the Whig cause would probably gain more by your nomination.”³² Arnold did not respond well to Nelson’s pandering, and Brownlow launched a subsequent series of attacks on the Greene County Whig’s character. Fueling the argument was Arnold’s refusal to even attend the Nelson-led Whig convention. Strife ensued. “I knew Thomas A.R. Nelson to be at the bottom of all this,” Arnold wrote in a pamphlet handed out at Whig gatherings across the region. He charged Brownlow as Nelson’s “dirty and filthy tool, and the miserable and scandalous little caucus were the pliant tools of Brownlow.”³³ Arnold did not stop with words. He sought to overthrow Brownlow and Nelson’s Whig leadership. “We can not [sic] get along with

³¹ John Bell Brownlow to Oliver P. Temple, Sept. 8, 1892, Oliver Temple Papers.

³² *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, April 28, 1841.

³³ *Tennessee (TN) Sentinel*, May 5, 1843. Arnold published his comments in a circular distributed to Whigs across Greene and Washington Counties. Haynes and Brownlow both ran copies of it in their newspapers; Thomas Arnold, elected as an anti-Jacksonian Whig in 1831 representing Tennessee’s Second Congressional District, moved to Greeneville in the late 1830s. He served another term in Congress, from 1841 to 1843, but chose not to seek reelection and resumed his law practice in Greeneville. Arnold maintained his prestige in the town, but he failed to discredit Nelson and Brownlow during their public feud in the early 1840s.

Brownlow, he was doing no more harm than good,” he wrote. “The first thing to be done is to have a blow-up with him and send him adrift.”³⁴

Whigs nominated Robert J. McKinney at the “miserable and scandalous” caucus, and Arnold published a series of blistering letters accusing Brownlow and Nelson of sabotaging the nominating process.³⁵ He claimed the Washington County Whigs had wrestled away control of the party and would lead it down a dark path. Arnold declared Nelson “a cripple” and “too small to cane or cowhide.”³⁶ Brownlow published Nelson’s lengthy rebuttal in the *Whig*. “In view of his repeated falsehoods and perversions, I feel constrained to publish him as *a liar a scoundrel and a Coward*,” Nelson declared. With the exception of “bodily size and physical strength,” Nelson claimed “to be his superior as to character and every thing else.”³⁷ His response may be viewed as a veiled challenge to a duel; for sure, Nelson attacked Arnold’s character and manhood in an era when both were sacred.

The exchange between Arnold and Nelson is noteworthy given the region’s absence of an elite planter class. White men in the South claimed honor by meeting threats with force.³⁸ “Honor,” wrote historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “required men to demonstrate their prowess and engage in fierce defense of individual, family, community, and regional reputation by duel, physical encounter, or war.”³⁹ Such powerful responses came first from the planter class. This behavior aided their top-tier social ranking; slaves and yeoman farmers knew who was in charge. That Arnold and Nelson played out their disagreement in public suggests that northeast Tennessee adapted parts of larger southern norms to their localized political culture: honor was

³⁴ Arnold to Oliver Temple, May 25, 1843, in Temple Papers.

³⁵ Arnold to Oliver Temple, May 15, 1843, in Temple Papers.

³⁶ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, May 8, 1843.

³⁷ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, May 12, 1841.

³⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behaviors in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 21-29.

³⁹ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 29.

typically associated with planters, and Nelson and Arnold, both slave-holding attorneys, harnessed that honor in a region mostly void of large-scale planters and lagging in political power.

Other hostilities were indicative of the fiery nature of northeast Tennessee politics. It is unclear how the conflict between Landon Carter Haynes and Parson Brownlow started, but the feud was among the most memorable in the antebellum period. Born to a wealthy family in Washington County, Haynes edited the Elizabethton-based *Tennessee Sentinel* from 1840 to 1849. The disagreements between Haynes and Brownlow, from topics of religion and journalistic practices to local and state politics, were frequent subjects of the *Sentinel* and *Whig*. In February 1840, Brownlow charged that Haynes was a “young puppy, because, he himself, the dishonest rascal, and unprincipled scoundrel, does not possess the nerve to assail me.”⁴⁰

After months of personal and professional squabbling, the strife between Haynes and Brownlow became violent on March 2, 1840. Circuit Court meant crowded streets in Elizabethton that day. Brownlow sat in his home writing by candlelight when two shots rang out. Bullets reportedly raced just past his head.⁴¹ Uninjured and undaunted, Brownlow ran to the door and fired at his attacker. Joined by a friend, Brownlow chased the assailant through the town. The Washington County Democrat never admitted to shooting at his enemy, but Brownlow—and even some of Haynes’s friends—believed Haynes guilty. A few months later on May 14, 1840, Brownlow and Haynes met on the streets of Jonesborough. Accounts vary as to what happened. Some claim that Brownlow, armed with a sword cane and pistol, charged Haynes, striking him in

⁴⁰ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, February 27, 1840. According to Bellamy, Haynes attempted to avoid conflict with Brownlow in early 1840. See “The Political Career of Landon Carter Haynes,” 12.

⁴¹ The account of the altercation between Haynes and Brownlow comes from two sources. Bellamy also wrote about the fight. See Bellamy, “The Political Career of Landon Carter Haynes,” 13-14. Brownlow later published his own accounts. See *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, March 18, 1840.

the head with his cane. Brownlow grabbed Haynes by the neck and pounded his head with the pistol. During the altercation, Haynes shot Brownlow through the leg, and spectators stopped the fight after seeing blood gushing out of the wound. The near fatal encounter did little to cool the rivalry; Brownlow continued to publically harass Haynes over the next several years. In 1841, Brownlow wrote that Haynes became a Presbyterian but had his license to preach removed for “slander and falsehood.”⁴² Haynes did become a minister, but stopped preaching over doctrinal disagreements with the church.⁴³

Some historians may dub such a grudge inconsequential. After all, the second-party system ushered dramatic changes to politics all across America, and this type of rancorous conduct was not necessarily unique to northeast Tennessee. Scholar Mary Ryan wrote that politics in the mid 1800s were fractious and violent. Vigilance Committees silenced opposition in New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco.⁴⁴ “The municipal civil wars,” Ryan wrote, “were harbingers of the great sectional conflict to follow.”⁴⁵ An impulsive editor shooting at his professional rival may seem normal at a time when legislators went armed into congressional sessions and duels remained popular. The conflict becomes more meaningful when one considers the implications of the political battle. Brownlow and Haynes were both financial elites by northeast Tennessee standards. Haynes came from a wealthy family and owned slaves before he turned 25 while Brownlow employed two servants in 1840 and four by 1850.⁴⁶ Their rivalry unfolded in a region where, as they believed, political power had been wrestled away by more powerful sections of the state. They were political big fish duking it out in a political puddle. The

⁴² *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, May 14, 1840.

⁴³ Bellamy, “The Political Career of Landon Carter Haynes,” 20.

⁴⁴ Mary Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xii.

⁴⁵ Ryan, *Civil Wars*, 3.

⁴⁶ 1840 US Census Bureau, *Statistics*, 79; 1840 US Census Bureau, *Statistics*, 250; 1850 US Census Bureau, *Statistics*, 301.

prize was top-tier status in a congressional district that had not sent a man to the governorship since 1819.⁴⁷ But it was everything to these up-and-coming politicians. The antebellum rivalry may have stoked both their desires to gain public office. At the very least, scuffles between the two editors proved a decisive signpost for the style of politics that defined the district through the 1840s.

The 1845 campaign for the First District Congressional seat, coming five years after the Brownlow-Haynes affair, became “the bitterest race” of Andrew Johnson’s congressional career. It seems fitting that his opponent was “Parson” Brownlow.⁴⁸ Brownlow was furious that Brookins Campbell, a longtime rival of Johnson’s, would not challenge the Greeneville politician in the Democratic primary. Brownlow could not tolerate the thought of Johnson cruising unencumbered to reelection, and a gathering of Whigs in Greeneville nominated the Jonesborough journalist to challenge Johnson. The bitterness would be so great after the election that Brownlow and Johnson refused to speak to one another until the secession crisis briefly united them in 1860.⁴⁹

Throughout the campaign, Brownlow demonstrated the region’s brand of populism in three major ways. First, he declared the ordinary people unbound by class. Second, he cast Johnson as elite and self-serving. Finally, he attempted to mobilize the “common man” against his opponent. In so doing, Brownlow launched his most venomous denunciation of the antebellum era. Brownlow pledged to defeat the “malice and low pothouse meanness of ... Andy Johnson.”⁵⁰ He declared that “certain faces” could never be trusted, and “Toady Andy”

⁴⁷ Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics*, 49.

⁴⁸ “To the Freemen of the First Congressional District of Tennessee,” Oct. 15, 1845, Johnson Papers, 1:123-124. Johnson circulated the pamphlet throughout northeast Tennessee.

⁴⁹ Fisher, *War at Every Door*, 21.

⁵⁰ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, September 30, 1845.

possessed such a face.⁵¹ Over months of intense attacks, Brownlow asserted that Johnson was a swindler, a perjurer, and an infidel. Each week for over a month, Brownlow published a series of “manifestos” that detailed why he should win. In his populist-style declarations, Brownlow repeatedly claimed to be a hard worker and “never one time a drain” on the public. He doubled down on his “public service” to the masses and decreed his own humility, writing that he never sought to run for office.⁵²

To the public, Brownlow made campaign reform a signature plank in the election; in reality, it was more a self-serving tactic on the editor’s part. He championed circulars, arguing that candidates should write out their political positions instead of “calling the people out from their harvesting and their work to hear so many long speeches.”⁵³ “Being poor,” Brownlow claimed, “and having to attend my private concerns here daily” kept the Whig from speaking tours. Published in an “Extra” edition of the Whig, Brownlow identified himself with the poor and implied stumping candidates took advantage of northeast Tennessee voters. Writing and publishing circulars was expensive, he maintained, “and this is the reason why they prefer riding about, and sponging [sic], eating the best, and feeding their horses on other people’s grain. Meanwhile, I will remain at home, at work, eating my own bread and meat, as all genuine Republicans should do!”⁵⁴

In August, he wrote again about campaign reform, boasting that he never called “the honest people out from their work, under a pretense of making speeches, like my opponent, solely to get home with some of them and sponge [sic] upon them, because they live better than

⁵¹ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, October 3, 1845.

⁵² *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, October 3, 1845.

⁵³ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, July 18, 1845.

⁵⁴ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, July 18, 1845.

we poor dogs do in these filthy little towns.”⁵⁵ His call to reform campaign practices likely had a selfish angle: Brownlow was a far better writer than Johnson and would surely benefit if the electorate encountered candidates solely through written word. Yet Brownlow rarely failed to reference his alleged economic standing. First, Brownlow referred to himself as “being poor” and “we poor dogs” who live “in these filthy little towns.” Elites in the antebellum South, though, tended to live in towns; here was another example of Brownlow downplaying his economic status. His vows of poverty attempted to cut a major distinction with Johnson. He highlighted his modest upbringing, noting that his birth in the Virginia mountains was not among “the rich valley people who tilled farms of plantation proportions.”⁵⁶ Brownlow presented himself as a common man, unlike his well-to-do opponent who could never understand the daily struggles of northeast Tennesseans.

The reality was that Brownlow, like Johnson, lived much better than the average northeast Tennessean. After his marriage to Eliza O’Brien in 1839, he settled in the Watauga Valley to launch his newspaper. The 1840 census does not list a value for the *Whig*; however, the total net worth of the two weekly newspapers in Washington County was \$3,000. Given that Brownlow operated one of the two, and that the *Whig* enjoyed a higher circulation, one may surmise that the newspaper alone placed him in a higher economic bracket than most of his neighbors. Brownlow acquired two servants at some point during the early 1840s, another indicator of his superior financial status. For perspective, less than 3% of the population in Washington County had servants during the 1840 census, and slaves constituted only 7% of the

⁵⁵ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, August 15, 1845.

⁵⁶ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, August 1, 1845.

populace.⁵⁷ Brownlow's self-serving class rhetoric was an attempt to resonate with voters. Like much of his writing, truth tarnished his narrative.

In one substantial way, Brownlow's populist tactics made him something of an anomaly among nineteenth-century Whigs. If it was true that the Whigs were not a party of the wealthy, as Michael Holt suggests, the party nonetheless attracted the wealthy. Paul Bergeron's analysis of antebellum politics demonstrates as much. Lawyers, physicians and other "learned professions" constituted a higher percentage in Whig and anti-Democratic parties from 1836 to 1860.⁵⁸ Brownlow's choice to politick as a man of the people, emphasizing a low economic class status, suggests his conviction that such campaigning would be potent in the First Congressional District. His appeals were not entirely fiction, and he may well have viewed himself in this manner. Brownlow found no fortune as a circuit-riding minister. Much like Johnson, Brownlow was climbing the social hierarchy, a man of humble origins in a district where it remained difficult to advance socially. What he failed to mention in the 1845 campaign is that he already existed far above the standard of living for most antebellum northeast Tennesseans. To bolster his populism, Johnson accused Brownlow of supporting ad valorem taxation (a tax determined based on the amount of one's property with clear implications for slave owners), a charge Brownlow never appeared to accept or defend. Unlike other antebellum Democrats, Johnson backed the tax because he believed it would hit wealthy slave owners the hardest. Across the South, slave owners deplored the tax because slaves could be taxed as property rather than persons. Johnson argued that as tax assessments increased to fund internal improvements in

⁵⁷ 1840 US Census Bureau, *Print and Binding*, 259; 1840 U.S. census, Washington County, Tennessee, population schedule, p. 52 (stamped), University of Virginia's Historical Census Browser, accessed January 22, 2016. <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php>.

⁵⁸ Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics*, 190.

other parts of the state, northeast Tennessee farmers and laborers bore an unfair share of the tax burden.⁵⁹

Brownlow also attacked Johnson's character while building up his own, a tried and true political method. "If elected," he declared, "the district would be rid of the scandal of Infidelity, and all the churches would have a friend and representative there—True, I differ with some as to the details of the thing, but then, in the great matters of Faith and Practice, we agree to a fraction!"⁶⁰ He bragged in July 1845 that he had never been "troublesome to the dear People," a reference to never being on poor relief or demanding public money.⁶¹ The race attracted the attention of newspapers across the nation. The New York-based *Poughkeepsie Journal and Eagle* re-printed Brownlow's "manifestos" and frequently mocked the Jonesborough editor. Running under the headline "Humors of Politics," the *Journal and Eagle* editor called Brownlow "a notorious wag." "The Whigs," the editorial continued, "have perpetrated a practical joke on him by running him for Congress. He takes it in good part however ... He throws out each week a new manifesto to the constituency, giving strong reasons why he should be chosen, so cleverly put together that they must like him as a candidate, if not as a Congressman."⁶²

For his part, Johnson fired a barrage of attacks at Brownlow, his supporters, and the so-called "aristocracy" of northeast Tennessee. Like Brownlow's campaign, Johnson employed populist appeals in a three-step fashion. He praised the "common man," disparaged Brownlow and his followers as undemocratic elites, and urged his own supporters to mobilize against his enemy. Johnson vilified Dr. Alexander Williams, an avowed Brownlow supporter, dubbing him

⁵⁹ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, August 1, 1845.

⁶⁰ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, September 21, 1845.

⁶¹ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, September 21, 1845.

⁶² *Poughkeepsie (NY) Journal and Eagle*, August 1, 1845. Locofocos were a faction of the Democratic Party that existed primarily in the North. They were staunch opponents of monopoly and advocated laissez-faire economics.

“Alexander the Great.”⁶³ In a campaign pamphlet that carried a defiant tone, Johnson declared that the “aristocracy in this district . . . know that I love and desire the approbation of the freemen of this State. “The fact of a farmer or mechanic stepping out of the field or shop into an office of distinction and profit,” he continued, “is particularly offensive to an upstart, swell-headed, iron heeled, bobtailed aristocracy, who infest all our little towns and villages, who are too lazy and proud to work for a livelihood [sic], and are afraid to steal.”⁶⁴

The same campaign circular drove a wedge between the poor and “aristocracy.” He dubbed the region’s wealthy citizens “upstart, swelled headed, iron heeled.” In few a sentences, Johnson carefully and forcefully divided his constituents by class. “This portion of the community,” Johnson declared, “set themselves up as the exclusive owners of all the offices and high places in the country.” If Johnson’s “owners” and “high places” rhetoric was ambiguous, what followed was not. “If a man that has been in the habit of laboring for his support dare submit his pretensions to the consideration of the people,” he continued, “he is looked upon by the aristocracy with contempt, hissed out of countenance for being so presumptuous.”⁶⁵ He stopped short of calling for revolt, but his rhetoric looked remarkably similar to what he told a group of Greene County farmers five years earlier: “Power was always stealing from the many to give to the few.” He concluded his campaign pamphlet with more wholesome praise of the poor, writing that he placed his “trust in God that the time may come when the offices of this nation, both State and Federal, profitable and honorable, from the President down to the lowest in the gift of the people, will be filled with the farmers and mechanics of the country.”⁶⁶

⁶³ “To the Freemen,” Oct. 15, 1845, Johnson Papers, 1:123-124. See Byrdsall Fitzwilliam, *The History of Loco-foco or Equal Rights Party: It’s Movements, Conventions and Proceedings* (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2010).

⁶⁴ Johnson to David M. Patterson, October 10, 1845, in Johnson Papers, 1:26.

⁶⁵ “To the Freemen,” Oct. 15, 1845, Johnson Papers, 1:123-124.

⁶⁶ “To the Freemen,” Oct. 15, 1845, Johnson Papers, 1:123-124.

Though his contempt for the “aristocracy” was great, Johnson never established economic parameters for who belonged to the elite group. While not on par with the likes of Dr. Alexander Williams, it is easy to tag Johnson’s economic means as “aristocracy” in Greeneville. Understanding the South’s antebellum social structures gives some understanding to Johnson’s ability to navigate his district’s demographics. Few in numbers but mighty in influence, plantation owners topped the social hierarchy in a region where slaves and middling yeoman farmers made up the bulk of the southern population. These planters commanded enormous wealth. About 3,000 families across the South owned at least 100 slaves.⁶⁷ Even richer than those, historian Bruce Levine has shown, were the roughly 300 planters who owned upwards of 250 slaves.⁶⁸ The estimated fifty Deep South planters who owned at least 500 slaves represented the peak of southern social society. These rich planters, however, were not found in northeast Tennessee, where the average citizen was poorer than other members of the would-be Confederacy. On the campaign trail, Johnson often referenced his “humble beginnings” and his “simple pedigree” while vilifying wealthy elites. His proclaimed biography held no little truth. Johnson was indeed born in a cabin to poor whites in Raleigh, North Carolina, and the former tailor may lay claim to rising the furthest of any person to ascend to the White House. Yet just like northeast Tennessee’s other political leaders, Johnson lived far above the economic means of a vast majority of his constituents. His two businesses, five slaves, and two servants by 1850 confirmed it.⁶⁹ For comparison, only 5% Greene County residents owned slaves.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Bruce Levine, *The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution that Transformed the South* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2010), 3-4.

⁶⁸ Levine, *The Fall of the House of Dixie*, 4.

⁶⁹ “To the Freemen,” Oct. 15, 1845, Johnson Papers, 1:125.

⁷⁰ 1840 U.S. census, Greene County, Tennessee, population schedule, p. 52 (stamped), University of Virginia’s Historical Census Browser, accessed January 22, 2016. <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/county.php>.

The next congressional election pitted Johnson against the up-and-coming attorney Oliver Temple. It was not, however, their first encounter. Nearly a decade earlier, Dr. Alexander Williams hosted a banquet in Greeneville. Given to honor one of Johnson's rivals, most of Greeneville's wealthy citizens attended. Johnson's absence was conspicuous. According to the 16-year-old Temple, Johnson taunted the young Whig attorney. "Some day I will show the stuck-up aristocrats who is running the country," he said, "a cheap purse-proud set they are, not half as good as the man who earns his bread by the sweat of his brow."⁷¹ Flash forward to 1847 and Temple endeavored to oust Johnson from his legislative seat. Still bitter over Johnson's victory two years earlier, Brownlow encouraged Temple to declare his candidacy. Though he had never sought public office, Temple understood the nature of northeast Tennessee politics during the 1840s. "I knew I would be wounded," he wrote, "but I also suspected I could deal Johnson a few wounds of my own."⁷² Almost immediately after asserting his intention to run, Temple distributed a circular in Jonesborough and spoke in Taylorville, then the seat of Johnson County. Johnson and Temple debated in Sullivan County and again in Jonesborough.⁷³

As Temple attacked Johnson before a large crowd near the Sullivan County courthouse, a member of the crowd shouted at the Whig candidate "to give it to him" and the Whig "hurled my charges against my competitor with taunting and almost vindictive assurance."⁷⁴ Meanwhile, Johnson poked fun of Temple's "college voice" and his "little" and "contemptible" carriage.⁷⁵ Johnson's attack, albeit a poor one, appeared to be his way of accusing Temple of arrogant behavior. Johnson made his opponent sound like a wannabe aristocrat, aspiring to the part but

⁷¹ Temple, *Notable Men*, 38.

⁷² Temple to W.G. Brownlow, October 30, 1848, in Temple Papers.

⁷³ Temple, *Notable Men*, 39.

⁷⁴ *The Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, August 18, 1847; Temple to John Bell Brownlow, Jan. 17, 1894, Temple Papers.

⁷⁵ Temple to John Bell Brownlow, Jan. 17, 1894.

not yet there. The Democrat's attack was not entirely false. Only 24 at the time, Temple had not amassed the wealth he ultimately would. Still, the young Whig was college educated and a practicing attorney, both signs of esteem in the antebellum South. His father, Greeneville resident James Temple, owned a large farm and \$3,000 worth of personal real estate.⁷⁶

The 1847 campaign was extensive for both candidates, touching almost every county seat. Although Johnson won, the spiteful nature of the campaign stuck with Temple. The man who was the first to tell East Tennessee's Civil War story remained struck by the work that went into his losing effort. "I commenced a strenuous system of private work, by letters and private conferences, which was kept up night and day until the election. I rode, I wrote letters, I talked all over the dis-trict [sic]," Temple wrote years later. "How much work I did, how many secret conferences held with Democrats no man, except myself, will ever know, for I shall never tell."⁷⁷ When Johnson resumed his seat in Washington, he made a speech against a proposed tax on coffee and tea. Part of his address was reprinted in *The Greeneville Democrat*. His address mirrored an 1844 speech he made advocating a direct tax of the people. He argued high tariffs were a business-oriented model based on the National Bank that was "incompatible with such a great nation" and "prosperous" only in "building up an aristocracy."⁷⁸ Johnson declared "the burdens of taxation should be shifted off the shoulders of the poor, who had too long borne an undue and exorbitant proportion of them."⁷⁹ Taxes, Johnson asserted, "should be put upon the wealth of the country."⁸⁰

⁷⁶ 1850 US Census Bureau, *Print and Binding*, 302/

⁷⁷ Temple, *Notable Men*, 100.

⁷⁸ Speech on the Protective Tariff, May 1844, quoted in LeRoy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, eds., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson: Volume 1, 1822-1851* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1967), 166-167.

⁷⁹ *The Greeneville (TN) Democrat*, February 14, 1847.

⁸⁰ *The Greeneville (TN) Democrat*, February 14, 1847.

As these campaigns raged across the region in the 1830s and 1840s, the historian must ask if the constituency in northeast sensed the irony of these populist appeals. As with most historical questions, the answer is not easily discerned. Evidence suggests that some were duped, believing fully that agitating political leaders represented the plain country folk. As Johnson absorbed the “many taunts, the jeers” from Whigs in upper East Tennessee, he fired back with ferocity—a trait that earned Johnson an unbreakable loyalty from his Greeneville Democratic base.⁸¹ Brownlow, too, had loyal followers who considered him “warm hearted and genial.”⁸² Others simply relished the controversial nature of the region’s politics. Readers of Brownlow’s Jonesborough newspaper and, later, the *Knoxville Whig*, savored the “spicy and biting views” of an editor who was “constantly involved in altercations.”⁸³

The clearest manifestation of the region’s political culture came in two forms: bouts between northeast Tennessee leaders with Middle and West Tennessee officials, as well as their rhetoric over the southern plantation system. Leading northeast Tennessee politicians all played on citizens’ fears after power shifted to Middle Tennessee. By the early 1840s, Johnson was at the center of the state sectional debate. Already a star in the state Democratic Party, Johnson voted repeatedly against Nashville as the permanent location of the capital, preferring Knoxville instead. For most northeast Tennesseans, the single most important issue facing the General Assembly was internal improvements. One historian argued that the region frequently did not get its share of authorized state assistance, while Middle Tennessee usually got double the amount of

⁸¹ John Bell Brownlow to Temple, Sept. 8, 1892, Temple Papers. Brownlow wrote to Temple that the Democratic base in Greeneville was always aroused when Johnson attacked the so-called southern aristocracy.

⁸² E. Merton Coulter, *William G. Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands* (1937; rpt. With introduction by James W. Patton, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971), v-xi, 133.

⁸³ E. Merton Coulter, *Fighting Parson*, xi.

its eastern counterpart.⁸⁴ In 1838, for example, East Tennessee received only \$389,000 of the \$1.4 million in bonds allotted specifically to the region.

When they were not fighting each other, northeast Tennessee's political leaders focused their disdain on Middle Tennessee. In 1841, residents from across northeast Tennessee spoke publicly about the region's formal separation from the rest of the state. On November 22 and 23, 1841, rumblings about cession erupted at an internal improvement convention in Knoxville. The minutes from the convention are murky, but some historians believe Knoxville-based Congressman Joseph L. Williams voiced his support for a separate East Tennessee. In a letter dated November 27, a Cocke County man informed a friend living in New York that separation was popular throughout East Tennessee and that both Congressman Williams and editor Brownlow supported the measure.⁸⁵

Johnson entered the debate in force on December 7, introducing a resolution that would grant East Tennessee the option to secede from the Volunteer State and form the "State of Frankland." In his resolution, Johnson requested the appointment of a joint committee to consider the cession of the region to the federal government. Further, Johnson asked the governor to consult leaders in sections of several other states, including western North Carolina, southwest Virginia, and northern Georgia, to gauge interest in resurrecting the "State of Frankland."⁸⁶ Johnson's resolution echoed the call from the Knoxville internal improvement convention that East Tennessee could and should seek separation from Tennessee. On the surface, Johnson's motivations were straightforward. His home region was disadvantaged, as

⁸⁴ Eric Russell Lacy, *Vanquished Volunteers: East Tennessee Sectionalism from Statehood to Secession*. (Johnson City: East Tennessee State University Press, 1949), 114-115.

⁸⁵ Ezekiel Birdseye, Newport, Tennessee, to Gerrit Smith, Syracuse, New York, November 27, 1841, quoted in W. Freeman Galpin, "Letters of an East Tennessee Abolitionist," *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications*, III, 144-150.

⁸⁶ Andrew Johnson, "Resolutions for the Establishment of the State of Frankland," in Leroy P. Graf and Ralph W. Hoskins, eds., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press) 1:61-63.

larger, more powerful sections of the state robbed his home of appropriations and political power. Representing the county that housed the capital of the State of Frankland, Johnson also expected to play a prominent role in the new state's politics since its capital would be Greeneville.

Brownlow supported eastern Tennessee's separation as well, but for reasons of his own. The day after Johnson issued his resolution in the state senate, Brownlow declared that Joseph Williams's motion—the lawmaker issued a resolution in the state house the same day Johnson made his declaration in the senate—ought to be supported because East Tennessee had little in common with the middle and western sections of the state. Much of what Brownlow wrote was out of touch with reality. He claimed that internal improvement money stayed in Nashville, “the seat of Dictation,” and rarely reached Knoxville, Jonesborough, or any other city in east Tennessee.⁸⁷ Brownlow charged that northeast Tennessee would remain “mere supplicants at the gate of the Nashville temple” so long as the Middle Tennessee “aristocracy” controlled the General Assembly.⁸⁸ His narrative resonated with his readers. The state senate approved the statehood measure in 1842; not a single East Tennessee lawmaker voted against it. When the resolution came before the House, the body added an amendment that required a statewide referendum. A majority of state senators refused to vote for the amendment, and the resolution died. A similar bill in 1843 sought a separate East Tennessee, but the measure also failed.⁸⁹

Speaker of the Tennessee House of Representatives from 1849 to 1851, Haynes shared Johnson and Brownlow's concerns for northeast Tennessee. In the General Assembly, he presented petitions from northeast Tennesseans related to improvements for roads, schools, and

⁸⁷ *The Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, December 8, 1841.

⁸⁸ *The Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, December 15, 1841

⁸⁹ Williams, *The Lost State of Franklin*, 285.

courts. Haynes “fought desperately” for a bill’s passage that would link railroads in East Tennessee to southwest Virginia.⁹⁰ He spoke at a June 18, 1847, internal improvement meeting that adopted a resolution advocating the construction of a railroad. In a debate over railroad funding the next year, Haynes said: “I for one am not willing to see the noble people of that section that I have the honor to represent left behind those of every other.”⁹¹ Most East Tennesseans and their politicians, as one historian argued, identified themselves as victims of a precise place.⁹²

Debates in the 1840s emphasized just how much northeast Tennessee lost to the rest of the state and how important the First District seat was in comparison. Democrats and Whigs were remarkably united over both the “State of Frankland” and internal improvements. Democrat Brookins Campbell, a longtime rival of Johnson, urged the state senate to back the region’s separation in 1841 “not upon the ground that East Tennessee was disposed to complain of her connection with Middle and West Tennessee, but because of the dissimilarity of her interests and of the difficulty of legislating for a people separated from the balance of the State by a great natural barrier.”⁹³ Although he was a respected attorney and campaigner by the 1840s, it seems Nelson never partook in the debates surrounding the proposed “State of Frankland.” Still, he harbored notions of the region’s handicaps. In 1838, Nelson served as secretary during a meeting in Elizabethton aimed at asking the legislature to revoke some of the town’s seemingly meaningless laws. For example, a man was subject to a fine if he “might happen to kiss his wife

⁹⁰ Bellamy, “The Political Career of Landon Carter Haynes,” 26.

⁹¹ Bellamy, “The Political Career of Landon Carter Haynes,” 26.

⁹² Tom Lee, “The Lost Cause That Wasn’t: East Tennessee and the Myth of Unionist Appalachia” in *Reconstructing Appalachia: The Civil War’s Aftermath*, edited by Andrew L. Slap, 293-298. Louisville: University of Kentucky Press.

⁹³ Brookins Campbell quoted in Samuel Cole Williams, *The Lost State of Franklin* (New York: The Press of the Pioneers, 1933), 285.

on a Sunday.”⁹⁴ The core of the protest, according to one historian, was that Elizabethton was not getting its fair share in bonds for internal improvements. The General Assembly acquiesced the town’s request in 1838, though residents of Elizabethton continued to complain about the lack of internal improvements until the Civil War.⁹⁵

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, leading northeast Tennessee Democrats and Whigs continued a barrage of attacks against the so-called aristocracy. Because they never defined the “aristocracy,” each leader could position the Deep South southern planter class as a straw man, a body of elites always ready to take away what little wealth and property northeast Tennesseans had. Yet the elite planter class maintained a virtually non-existent presence in the First Congressional District throughout the antebellum era. Northeast Tennesseans were considerably poorer than other members of the would-be Confederacy, and these men would have been part of any regional “aristocracy.” Still, the populist-style attacks continued through the sectional crisis in 1860. Johnson lampooned not only the Greeneville and northeast Tennessee elite, but the “aristocracy” in Middle and West Tennessee and southern planters across the Deep South. Nelson and Brownlow took a similar approach; enemies from the outside demanded unity from within. A short article likely written by Johnson’s mentor, Sam Milligan, headlined “Good Society v. Codfish Aristocracy” appeared in the short-lived *Greeneville Spy* on June 1, 1854:

“The codfishes live in the best houses in town, which they own or rent, and are enabled to live in great style from their wealth, or the reputation of wealth no matter how they acquired it ... They give glittering dinners and cut a shine in the upper crust part of the human fry [sic]. They never visit the opera, theatre, or any public place of amusement

⁹⁴ Alexander, *Thomas A.R. Nelson*, 29.

⁹⁵ Alexander, *Thomas A.R. Nelson*, 30.

unless they can have the best and most prominent seats, without being inconvenienced by the other classes of society, whom they deem common and vulgar.”⁹⁶

Johnson derided others more directly. In early 1850, one of Johnson’s most ferocious disagreements came with Jefferson Davis, a newly elected representative from Mississippi. In a speech praising his father-in-law, the late General Zachary Taylor, Davis lauded their mutual alma mater, West Point Academy. Davis championed the school and the accomplishments of its graduates, asking if “a blacksmith or a tailor could have secured the same results.”⁹⁷ Johnson pounced on the future Confederate president’s comments. In typical northeast Tennessee fashion, he denounced such aristocratic arrogance and launched into a ferocious defense of poor southerners. The Mississippi Senator “had seen fit to make an invidious distinction, and to strike an unwarrantable and unauthorized blow upon a certain portion of the community,” recorded a Congressional report, “and Mr. J. belongs to the class that was alluded to, and here, in the face of an American Congress, he was not ashamed to avow he was a mechanic, and of that class to which the gentleman alluded yesterday.”⁹⁸ While Davis said he meant no offense, Johnson continued his oratorical defense of the middling class. Johnson declared that the nation “had an illegitimate, swaggering, bastard, scrub aristocracy, who assumed to know a good deal, but who, when the flimsy veil of pretention was torn off from it, was shown to possess neither talents, information, nor a foundation on which you can rear a superstructure that would be useful.”⁹⁹

Politics across the state and nation grew increasingly intense throughout the 1850s. Several events captured strong voter interest during the decade preceding the Civil War, especially the Compromise of 1850 and the presidential election of 1860. In seven statewide

⁹⁶ *The Greeneville (TN) Spy*, June 1, 1854.

⁹⁷ Congressional Globe, 36 Cong., 2 Sess., Appendix 106.

⁹⁸ Congressional Globe, 36 Cong., 2 Sess., Appendix 106.

⁹⁹ Congressional Globe, 36 Cong., 2 Sess., Appendix 106.

contests between 1851 and 1859, vote totals increased all but twice.¹⁰⁰ Interparty factionalism was not as prominent as it had been in the 1830s and 1840s in gubernatorial elections, thanks in part to the breakup of the Whig Party. While Brownlow, Nelson and Haynes assumed leadership positions in the Know Nothing and Opposition Parties, other former Whigs, such as Senator James Jones, denounced the Know Nothings in 1855 and joined the Democrats. Though their targets changed, the rhetoric of northeast Tennessee leaders remained largely the same during the 1850s.¹⁰¹

Discussions around the Compromise of 1850 brought Johnson's views on race and slavery into further focus. Here, too, Johnson's politics had a populist angle. As he explained in speeches to fellow Democrats throughout the 1850s, Johnson valued slavery chiefly because it gave poor white men a better chance at advancement. As long as African Americans remained in chains, Johnson reasoned, whites had less economic competition. When the compromise passed in September, Johnson voted for all its measures except the abolition of the slave trade in Washington. In a speech two months earlier, Johnson declared "slavery has its foundation and will find its perpetuity in the Union, and the Union its continuance by a non-interference with the institution of slavery."¹⁰² Slaveholders had a defender in Johnson, but his reasons departed from other Deep South lawmakers who represented the interests of the planter class. Not unlike Jefferson Davis and other Lower South politicians, Johnson saw African-Americans as inferior. He carried that belief to the White House. Planters in the antebellum era even shared Johnson's

¹⁰⁰ An analysis of election data by Bergeron revealed that voter turnout increased significantly in northeast Tennessee throughout the 1850s. The totals: 125, 626 votes in 1851; 115,486 votes in 1852; 124,485 votes in 1853; 132, 999 votes in 1855; 139,766 votes in 1856; 130,985 votes in 1857; and 144, 453 votes in 1859. See *Antebellum Politics*, 59-61.

¹⁰¹ Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics*, 62.

¹⁰² Frank Moore, *The Speeches of Andrew Johnson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 176.

notion of white uplift. Johnson, however, saw slavery as a way to prop up middle class whites, not a measure to enrich the southern elite.

Brownlow's views on slavery evolved dramatically in the decades preceding the Civil War. He signed a petition in favor of abolishing slavery at the state's 1834 constitutional convention, but he only reluctantly backed slavery in the 1840s.¹⁰³ He was a vocal critic of the institution's expansion during debates over the Compromise of 1850. Brownlow emerged a champion of slavery, wrote one historian, "only in the 1850s as Southern politics grew increasingly intolerant of any hint of abolitionism."¹⁰⁴ His editorials on slavery never adopted Johnson's economic tone, but Brownlow's arguments suggested that his views on race took shape amid concerns for northeast Tennessee's white population. An 1857 *Whig* editorial written by South Carolina politician Waddy Thompson proclaimed blacks could exist in "bondage or barbarism ... a destiny which the Ethiopian race has furnished no exception."¹⁰⁵ Even as Brownlow blasted the Middle Tennessee "aristocracy," lamenting a lack of internal improvements for East Tennessee, he offered no sympathy to slaves or free blacks. In the sectional crisis, Brownlow counseled the North that if Republicans attempted to abolish slavery "there would not be a Union man among us in twenty-four hours."¹⁰⁶

As Congress debated the merits of the Compromise of 1850, Johnson remained focused on his beloved Homestead Bill. Johnson embraced the Jeffersonian idea of a virtuous yeoman farmer, and he believed a homestead act would increase the number of yeoman substantially; the

¹⁰³ *Journal of the Convention of the State of Tennessee: Tennessee Constitutional Convention* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1834), 40.

¹⁰⁴ Kyle Osborn, "Reconstructing Race: Parson Brownlow and the Rhetoric of Race in Postwar East Tennessee" in *Reconstructing Appalachia: The Civil War's Aftermath*, edited by Andrew L. Slap, (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 2010), 293.

¹⁰⁵ *Knoxville (TN) Whig*, October 15, 1857.

¹⁰⁶ *Knoxville (TN) Whig*, January 15, 1861.

Homestead Bill was the fruit of Johnson's ideology. In a series of letters to friend and former tailor Edmund Burke, Johnson lamented that the "present slavery agitation" deprived the Homestead Bill of attention.¹⁰⁷ His bill "would become the most prominent subjects for consideration." Johnson and Burke laid out multiple reasons why the Homestead Bill was important and why it should take precedence over the 1850 compromise. At its core, the act would "be the means of greatly increasing the number of independent owners and cultivators of the soil, who are, and have been in all ages, the best supporters of public morality and the staunchest defenders of civil liberty."¹⁰⁸

Johnson's rhetoric over both the Homestead Bill and the Compromise of 1850 further illustrated his populist appeal and old school Jacksonian ideology. "From the acquaintance you have with me you know that I am a democrat in the proper sense of the term and vote and speak for the working man," Johnson wrote in 1850, "regardless of the frowns, taunts and Jeers of an upstart aristocracy."¹⁰⁹ Johnson's class-based criticism of the planter class won him further admiration from Burke, a northeast Tennessee native. Burke closed out an 1850 letter praising Johnson's focus on the non-elite: "Hoping that you may be successful in your noble and philanthropic efforts to secure homes to the homeless, independence to those who are now dependent, and a large accession to the yeomanry of the republic, who are its best and most reliable supporters and defenders in peace and war."¹¹⁰

There is little evidence to suggest that northeast Tennessee politics evolved substantially during the 1850s. Even after the Whig Party self-destructed, anti-Democratic factions enjoyed

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Johnson to Edmund Burke, August 31, 1850, quoted in LeRoy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins. *The Papers of Andrew Johnson: Volume 1, 1822-1851*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1967), 587-588.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson to Burke, August 31, 1850, Graf and Haskins, *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, 588.

¹⁰⁹ Johnson to Burke, August 31, 1850, quoted in LeRoy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, 587-588.

¹¹⁰ Edmund Burke to Johnson, August 31, 1850, quoted in LeRoy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, 588.

mostly favorable results in the state's northeastern edge. Nathaniel G. Taylor, a Carter County-born Whig, was elected to the First Congressional District in 1854. Princeton educated and a practicing attorney, Taylor lost in a close race to Brookins Campbell in 1852. Taylor continued the tradition of wealthy elites representing the district in Congress. Thomas Nelson won the seat in 1859 running as an Opposition candidate—one of the anti-Democratic parties that emerged after the collapse of the Whig party. While James Buchanan carried the Volunteer State in the presidential election of 1856, American Party candidate Millard Fillmore emerged victorious in northeast Tennessee. As Bergeron observed, the anti-Jacksonian tradition showed “remarkable persistence” in northeast Tennessee, and Democrats never got more than 54 percent of the vote in any statewide contest throughout the 1850s.¹¹¹

Johnson mixed views on race and class to defend his party and the Democratic nominee in 1856. Speaking at the Democratic state convention, Johnson articulated one of his clearest pro-slavery arguments of the antebellum era. Slavery, he told fellow Democrats, was a foundation in society. So long as blacks existed as slaves, poor whites maintained a better chance of advancing up the economic ladder and toppling the aristocracy. For Johnson, abolition functioned as another way to financially shackle the “common man.” “When we go to the North,” Johnson asked, “don't we find the white man and white woman performing the same menial service the blacks perform at the South? ... Let us now look at the men of the North—so much opposed to our peculiar institution. They are opposed to black slavery. They have found that white slavery is cheaper.”¹¹² White men, Johnson declared, would find it difficult to survive in an economy without slaves. Abolitionists wanted to see the price of labor “down to the point it will barely sustain life ... Such, gentlemen, is the position of those who oppose our institution,”

¹¹¹ Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics*, 147.

¹¹² *The Nashville (TN) Union and American*, January 12, 1856.

Johnson concluded, “standing by the side of Great Britain, with her iron-heel upon the necks of seventeen millions of laborers at home, and fifty-four millions abroad.”¹¹³

Nelson captured the First District Congressional seat in 1859, and his anti-aristocracy ideology remained intact—further evidence that northeast Tennessee politics evolved little from the 1840s. During his first address to Congress, Nelson emphasized that the United States faced its greatest threats from extremists: abolitionists in the North and fire-eaters in the South.

Wishing to express “one or two old-fashioned sentiments which, in days past and gone, were common to the American people,” Nelson blasted northern and southern disunionists.¹¹⁴

Members of the American Party, he contended, loved the Union and wished to see its continuation. His rhetoric smacked of anti-elite dogma. “We love that feature in every American constitution which abolishes all hereditary honors and distinctions,” he said to thunderous applause, “and enables the poor man’s child if he have talents and genius to climb, the steep where fame’s proud temple shines afar.”¹¹⁵

Brownlow and Nelson campaigned hard for John Bell in the 1860 presidential election. For Brownlow, Bell was the only candidate “who had the slightest hope” of defeating Lincoln.¹¹⁶ Brownlow, Nelson, and Johnson’s decision to campaign against the Illinois Republican seemed more reactionary than ideological. All wanted to protect slavery. None wanted to vote for a “Black Republican.” In a slew of editorials, Brownlow argued that Bell’s opposition to secession was essential to winning the presidential contest. To promote Bell, Brownlow invoked themes of the region’s exceptionalism through attacks on the western portion of the state. “Those West Tennessee disunionists,” Brownlow wrote, refused to acknowledge that neither Breckinridge nor

¹¹³ *The Nashville (TN) Union and American*, January 12, 1856.

¹¹⁴ *Congressional Globe*, 36 Cong., Sess. 46, Appendix 106.

¹¹⁵ *Congressional Globe*, 36 Cong., Sess. 46, Appendix 106.

¹¹⁶ *Knoxville (TN) Whig*, October 6, 1860.

Douglass could defeat Lincoln.¹¹⁷ Brownlow also used class-based language to lure the “common people” to Bell’s camp. “There are leaders beginning to say they prefer Lincoln to Bell, and others swear they would see Bell in hell ... This but reveals the spirit of those leaders. Not so with the common people, who, for the time being, are laying aside their prejudice, and scores of them in this very county are coming over to the Bell and Everett ticket, and thus voting for the country!”¹¹⁸

In 1860, Johnson campaigned for John C. Breckinridge with calls to save the Union from dissolution. Breckinridge appealed to many Democrats for his pro-slavery outlook. For much the same reasons that Brownlow and Nelson backed Bell, Johnson canvassed for the Kentucky politician because he believed that Breckinridge was the best candidate to defeat Lincoln and avoid civil war. Yet Johnson continued to criticize southern elites, including Breckinridge supporters. William L. Yancey, an Alabama fire-eater who helped organize the Democratic walkout earlier in the year, annoyed Johnson when he came to Knoxville. Yancey slurred “common working women” during a speech in Knoxville, and both Johnson and Brownlow condemned the comments.¹¹⁹ Haynes supported Breckinridge, and his support seemed more whole-hearted. He was an elector-at-large, delivering speeches across the state for Breckinridge. He professed his love for the South and opposed the “mean and damnable dogmas of squatter sovereignty.”¹²⁰

During the secession crisis in northeast Tennessee, these men were stars. Firmly cemented as a state political leader, Johnson cast his lot with the Union and opposed secession with ferocity. That decision created a first-time alliance with Brownlow and Nelson, along with

¹¹⁷ *Knoxville (TN) Whig*, October 12, 1860.

¹¹⁸ *Knoxville (TN) Whig*, October 12, 1860.

¹¹⁹ *Nashville (TN) Union and American*, September 30, 1860.

¹²⁰ Bellamy, “The Political Career of Landon Carter Haynes,” 28.

other East Tennessee Whigs who had long opposed the Greeneville Democrat. The joint canvass that Johnson and Nelson embarked on together in 1861 remains the most extensive speaking tour in the region's history. Oliver Temple was an old man when he recorded his account of the sectional crisis and ensuing civil war. Nearly 40 years before, Temple joined with other East Tennesseans who disavowed secession by a more than two-to-one margin. He was clearly impressed with his old friend Nelson and his new ally, Johnson. Reflecting on the Nelson-Johnson speaking tour, Temple wrote: "The supreme reason why a majority of the people of East Tennessee remained true to the old government was the fact that they had strong and determined leaders to ... share their perils."¹²¹ Statewide, secessionists prevailed by a staggering margin, winning 108,418 votes to 46,996 votes.¹²² Nearly 70% of East Tennesseans, and all but Sullivan County in northeast Tennessee, voted to remain in the Union. As southern states opted to join the new southern nation, violence erupted between Confederates and Unionists in the First Congressional District. In the months before and after the June vote, Unionists held two major conventions. At Knoxville, Johnson gave a fiery three-hour speech and the group adopted resolutions condemning secession. Pro-Union delegates met again in Greeneville, this time only days after Unionists across the state suffered a crushing defeat in a referendum. Discord marked the gathering in Greeneville. Unionist delegates reluctantly sought a separate East Tennessee, a move the state's General Assembly swiftly denied.¹²³ As Confederate soldiers moved to occupy East Tennessee, the region was about to endure the most painful four years in its history.

¹²¹ Oliver Temple, *East Tennessee and the Civil War* (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1899), 52.

¹²² Bergeron, *Antebellum Politics*, 124.

¹²³ Fisher, *War at Every Door*, 22.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

In 1861, Johnson frequently positioned the Civil War as a conflict between a democracy and an aristocracy. Jefferson Davis was a tyrant who yearned for northeast Tennesseans to be “handed over to the Confederacy like sheep to the shearers.”¹ Brownlow also maintained that the war would be fought by “the honest yeomanry of these border states, whose families live by their hard licks, four-fifths of whom own no negroes and never expect to own any.”² No one in East Tennessee, he charged, “could ever live in a Southern Confederacy and be made the hewers of wood and drawers of water for a set of aristocrats and overbearing tyrants.”³ Confederates also noted the influence of Johnson, Brownlow, and Nelson. Kirby Smith, a southern general, claimed that Johnson and Nelson induced East Tennesseans, “our backwoods yeomanry,” to believe the Confederacy would “elect a King to rule over them and grind them into powder.”⁴

Other northeast Tennessee leaders carried the pro-Union, anti-aristocracy torch. Horace Maynard, an American educator, attorney and politician, was an active politician for much of the latter half of the nineteenth-century. Known for his pleas to Lincoln for assistance in war-battered East Tennessee, Maynard dubbed secession as “the uprising of the few against the many; the assertion of the rights of property in disregard of personal rights.”⁵ Temple declared that “common people” would always be threatened in an aristocracy because “large slaveholding communities were always inimical to non-slaveholding men.”⁶ Historians have long noted the

¹ Robert Johnson to Andrew Johnson, April 8, 1862, Graf, Haskins, and Bergeron, *Johnson Papers*, 5: 280-82.

² *Knoxville (TN) Whig*, June 1, 1861.

³ *Knoxville (TN) Whig*, June 1, 1861.

⁴ Kirby Smith, “To the East Tennesseans in the United States Army,” Aug. 13, 1862.

⁵ Horace Maynard, “Application to Amend Sequestration Petition,” Jan. 18, 1862.

⁶ Oliver Temple, *East Tennessee and the Civil War* (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1899), 52.

populist-style attacks that Unionists lobbed against the Confederacy. Northeast Tennesseans, however, had been making those sorts of appeals long before the Civil War.

General Robert E. Lee's surrender in April 1865 brought a de facto end to the Civil War. Yet as Noel Fisher demonstrated, the conflict between Unionists and secessionists was not yet over. For more than two years after Lee's surrender, the region that housed some of the South's most aggressive anti-Confederates was defined by "beatings, killings, theft, and legal and political battles."⁷ Many Unionists, as Fisher argued, removed their enemies in "systematic and ruthless" ways.⁸ Citizens reported mobs. Secessionists claimed threats against their lives. In an area already defined by aggressive populism, violence raged on long after the Confederacy collapsed.

The theatrical elements of the second party system, so different from the campaigns before Andrew Jackson, generated as much political interest in northeast Tennessee as anywhere in the nation. Voter turnout suggests as much; the percentage increase from 1836 to 1840 of white males going to the polls topped the national average. In the 1830s, political leaders all across the nation tapped into a greatly expanded electorate. Food and music accompanied long speeches and extensive canvasses as officials from New York to Georgia journeyed to dozens, sometimes hundreds, of county seats "in a brutal test of stamina."⁹ Swarms of voters came to the events that marked a new era in politicking.

Of course, there was more to it than a free meal for potential voters and fancy campaign tunes. Most of the electorate in antebellum America maintained a "republican" world view,

⁷ Noel Fisher, *War at Every Door: Partisan Politics and Guerrilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1860-1869* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 154.

⁸ Fisher, *War at Every Door*, 159.

⁹ Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1989), 48.

fearing that liberty was “constantly endangered by self-seeking conspirators who would put aristocratic privilege ahead of the public good.”¹⁰ Whigs and Democrats alike professed to have the solution to such fears, crusading against “antirepublican monsters” in the wake of Jackson’s Bank War. While most Democrats in the 1830s agreed with Jackson that the “monster bank” was the great threat to liberty, Whigs decried “King Andrew the First” for his usurpation of power. Northeast Tennesseans heard both campaign pitches in the 1830s. Johnson lauded the principles of Old Hickory while Nelson and Brownlow scoffed at Jackson.

The arrival of the two-party system helped make it possible for populism and fiery class-based politics to thrive in northeast Tennessee. When Brownlow made the switch from ministry to journalism in 1839, the banner that first ran across the front page of his newspaper read: “UNAWED BY POWER, UNBRIBED BY GAIN, THE PEOPLE SHALL BE HEARD, AND THEIR RIGHTS VINDICATED.”¹¹ A more accurate banner could have read: “A Person of Power and Gain, The People Shall Be Misled, And Their Fears Played Upon.” Whether it was misrepresenting how much money northeast Tennessee received from the General Assembly, or declaring Nashville to be “the seat of Dictation,” Brownlow was never afraid to stretch the truth and “pile up epitaphs.”¹² He exploited his constituents’ fear that other sections of the state had taken their region’s political clout and that Deep South plantation owners plotted to steal what little his neighbors had. Johnson and Nelson often attacked the southern “aristocracy,” a never-identified group that could manifest in Greeneville, Nashville, or anywhere in the South.

Part of what makes northeast Tennessee stand out is that these sorts of populist appeals came from the political mainstream, not outsiders seeking to gain traction. Without question,

¹⁰ Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, 48.

¹¹ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, May 21, 1839.

¹² *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, June 1, 1840.

regional leaders like Brownlow, Johnson, Haynes, and Nelson were members of the political establishment by the middle half of the antebellum era. In 1840, Brownlow edited one of only three weekly newspapers in northeast Tennessee, and the *Jonesborough Whig* had the highest circulation of all the publications. From the late 1830s until the “Parson” moved to Knoxville in 1849, Brownlow was instrumental in organizing, leading, and reporting Whig rallies in Washington County, the fourth largest county in the region. Newspapers across the nation reprinted Brownlow’s columns, and Whigs throughout the Upper South recognized Brownlow’s leadership. Moving to Knoxville only enhanced his profile.

To be sure, Johnson won praise from the electorate in the late 1820s and early 1830s by challenging the Greeneville elite. The man born in a dirt-floor cabin, though, quickly became a political kingmaker in Greeneville, the region’s second largest city. In 1840, Brownlow referred to Johnson as “the adversary” around the same time that Knox County Whig legislator John R. Nelson called Johnson a leader among state Democrats.¹³ Johnson was also a wealthy resident of Greeneville, owning property, a business, and a few slaves, all markers of wealth in the antebellum period. In addition, he garnered statewide political fame. After attacking Whigs in a series of debates over who would fill the U.S. Senate seat of the late Felix Grundy, the Democratic *Nashville Union and American* declared Johnson’s debate performance “one of the most eloquent, powerful, and convincing arguments which we ever heard from the lips of man.” “We consider him, in point of talent, as decidedly among the first men of the State,” the newspaper read. “The Democracy of East Tennessee owe him much, and they will energetically seek to repay the debt of gratitude.”¹⁴ James K. Polk, then the governor of Tennessee, considered Johnson a possible candidate for one of the state’s two unfilled seats in the Senate.

¹³ *Jonesborough (TN) Whig*, February 12, 1841.

¹⁴ *Nashville (TN) Union and American*, March 21, 1843.

Both Haynes and Nelson were recognized members of the Washington County elite; they presided over large tracts of land, hired servants, and owned slaves. They enjoyed political support throughout the antebellum era; Nelson was elected to Congress in 1859 and Haynes served multiple terms in the state General Assembly.

The Civil War and Reconstruction were seismic events, and Greeneville's own Andrew Johnson inherited the daunting task of reconstructing a country ravaged by war. If he held that southern states should decide their own course following the war, he also believed African Americans could not govern themselves. Not surprising, his brand of Reconstruction proved lenient toward the white South. Initially supported by much of the North, Johnson incurred heavy criticism from Republicans and Democrats alike for his policies. Presidential Reconstruction was an abject failure. In one of the biggest deadlocks in U.S. political history, Johnson repeatedly blocked congressional acts he deemed unconstitutional. Most of those dealt with African-Americans' civil rights. He pardoned former Confederates and enraged Republican radicals by hampering efforts to quell the rise of ex-Rebels into seats of political power in the South. He twice vetoed the Freedmen's Bureau Bill, calling it unfair "class legislation." He believed such a bureau would keep former slaves from becoming self-sustaining. Perhaps more important, he argued, was that such an agency was never established for poor whites. The federal government, he wrote in his veto message, "has never deemed itself authorized to expend the public money for the rent or purchase of homes for the thousands, not to say millions, of the white race who are honestly toiling from day to day for their subsistence."¹⁵ The House of Representatives impeached Johnson in 1868, and the man who once enjoyed immense popularity in the North came within one vote of being removed from office.¹⁶

¹⁵ Frank Moore, *The Speeches of Andrew Johnson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 204.

¹⁶ Trefousse, *Andrew Johnson*, 101-103.

As an increasingly unpopular president, Johnson attempted to beat back Congress with a nationwide speaking tour, a swing around the circle reminiscent of his days as a Greeneville politician. His speeches at each stop were essentially the same, argued one historian.¹⁷ He praised the military and recounted his rise from tailor to president. He also attacked his Republican opponents, telling a crowd in Philadelphia that he would “fight traitors at the North” in the same way he battled secessionists in the Civil War.¹⁸ His actions were unprecedented. No sitting president had ever stumped. Unfortunately for Johnson, the rest of the country did not respond well to his brand of campaigning. When his presidential term was over, Johnson chose not to attend Ulysses S. Grant’s inauguration in 1869. He opted instead to give his Farewell Address to the American people, a final effort to justify his tumultuous time as Commander and Chief. The address was typical of the former tailor. His sole ambition, he wrote, had been “to restore the Union of the States, faithfully to execute the office of President, and, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution.”¹⁹ He took pride in his attempt to thwart “purposes and plans outside of the Constitution” and to “become an instrument of schemes of confiscation and of general and oppressive disqualifications.” His final curlicue was especially characteristic. “Forgetting the past,” he wrote, “let us return to the first principles of the Government, and, unfurling the banner of our country, inscribe upon it, in effaceable characters, ‘The Constitution and the Union, one and inseparable.’”

The *New York Herald* offered a pointed but accurate critique of Johnson’s address. “These parting words of the retiring President might have done very well at some political gathering in Tennessee,” the newspaper read.²⁰ “But as they stand they smell of chagrin,

¹⁷ Hans L. Trefousse, *Andrew Johnson: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 202.

¹⁸ *The Pennsylvania (PA) Gazette*, July 2, 1866.

¹⁹ Frank Moore, *The Speeches of Andrew Johnson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 176-177.

²⁰ *New York (NY) Herald*, December 21, 1869.

distrust, ill nature and bad blood.” Johnson stayed true to the style campaigning that made him a dominant political force in Tennessee. Inflexible and stubborn, Johnson doubled down on his rhetoric when challenged and never hesitated to insult his opponents. And why change? His political panache served him well in northeast Tennessee. Yet Johnson’s tactics were not well received in the late 1860s and after four years as the nation’s executive. His ability to stir his Appalachian constituents with a stump speech seemed out of date and out of touch. As capitalism and free labor led the country toward a New South, Johnson’s problem was that his tactics never evolved. He took what had been a winning political style to Washington. It did not work. Other regional leaders had mixed success after the war. As governor, Brownlow aligned with Radical Republicans in Congress. He advocated for black civil rights, though recent scholarship suggests “anything but genuine concern for African Americans.”²¹ He was elected to the United States Senate but declined to seek reelection in 1875. Replacing the aging politico was none other than his longtime enemy, Andrew Johnson. Upon his return to Washington, Johnson almost immediately launched long negative speeches against Republicans and his successor, President Ulysses S. Grant. It was the old tailor’s political revenge. As for Nelson, the one-term Congressman eventually united with Johnson and opposed Radical Reconstruction. Elected a Confederate Senator, Haynes practiced law in Memphis until his death in 1875. He never returned to East Tennessee.²²

It is difficult to gauge the legacy of antebellum northeast Tennessee political leaders. Twenty-first century Americans looking for an imaginary “golden age of politics,” a time when politicians armed themselves with dignity and respect, need not look at northeast Tennessee

²¹ Kyle Osborn, “Reconstructing Race: Parson Brownlow and the Rhetoric of Race in Postwar East Tennessee” in *Reconstructing Appalachia: The Civil War’s Aftermath*, edited by Andrew L. Slap, 293-298. Louisville: University of Kentucky Press.

²² Bellamy, “The Political Career of Landon Carter Haynes,” 40.

before the Civil War. The sort of populist appeals made by Johnson, Brownlow, and others, retains remarkable staying power in the region. Though then-Senator Barack Obama made the remarks about a community in Pennsylvania, the same could be said about present-day northeast Tennesseans: “And it’s not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.”²³ Similar to twenty-first century politicians who stir up the electorate through fear and propaganda, antebellum northeast Tennessee leaders played to the instincts and beliefs of the electorate. They gained votes independent of their platform. Antebellum northeast Tennesseans, in turn, embraced the populism brought on by the two-party system. Andrew Johnson left the White House in disgrace, but in a remarkable turn of political vindication, Tennessee sent Johnson back to the U.S. Senate in 1875. His return to Washington suggested a populist candidate could still win in post-Civil War northeast Tennessee. His victory inspired his supporters and stunned his opponents. In a letter published in the *Knoxville Weekly Chronicle*, W.R. Sevier called Johnson’s win “the greatest victory of your life.”²⁴ An editorial published in the *Lebanon Herald* was less generous. “Tennessee has too many deep wounds made by his hand,” the editors wrote, “to forget the alacrity with which he betrayed her and assumed the role of the military despot.”²⁵

In the decades that followed the Civil War and Reconstruction, East Tennesseans initially hoped to portray the region as decisively Unionist. A monument erected to Andrew Johnson, according to one study, honored a man “who maintained the conservative attitudes that many

²³ Ben Smith, “Obama on small-town Pa.: Clinging to religion, guns, xenophobia,” accessed February 5, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/blogs/ben-smith/2008/04/obama-on-small-town-pa-clinging-to-religion-guns-xenophobia-007737#ixzz412h74KO0> <http://www.politico.com/blogs/ben-smith/2008/04/obama-on-small-town-pa-clinging-to-religion-guns-xenophobia-007737>.

²⁴ *Knoxville (TN) Weekly Chronicle*, February 3, 1875.

²⁵ *Lebanon (TN) Herald*, February 3, 1875.

other East Tennesseans held.”²⁶ After his death, editors at *The Morristown Gazette* wrote that “this Government has never lost, and never will lose, a more loyal and fearless defender or its people a more devoted friend than Andrew Johnson.”²⁷ Memorializing the region’s Unionist heritage, however, diminished by the dawn of the twentieth-century. Locals mythologized Confederates leaders, tagging them heroes of the South’s common people. Today, a large granite statue praising General John Hunt Morgan sits in front of the Greene County Courthouse. Morgan was a great hero of the South slain at the peak of his military career, according to the monument. In truth, Morgan and his raiders participated in some of the most intense instances of guerilla violence in northeast Tennessee. The great irony is that a Confederate memorial sits in the courthouse of Johnson’s hometown, an area known for its aggressive populism, opposition to elite aristocrats, and strong Unionism.

²⁶ Kelli Nelson, “On the Imperishable Face of Granite”: Civil War Monuments and the Evolution of Historical Memory in East Tennessee, 1878-1931,” M.A. thesis, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, 2011, 55-56.

²⁷ *The Morristown (TN) Gazette*, January 19, 1876.

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