“The Crime against Missouri”: Slavery, Kansas, and the Cant of Southernness in the Border West

CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS

Scholars have long recognized the Kansas conflict as a rehearsal for the Civil War. As both a source of national debate over slavery’s extension and the scene of violence that laid bare the fiction of popular sovereignty, the story of “Bleeding Kansas,” has provided historians with essential material for broad studies of America’s antebellum political implosion. Contemporaries, too, recognized Kansas as a national political watershed; indeed, when Lincoln and Douglas squared off in their famed senatorial duel on the Illinois prairie during the hot summer of 1858, the Kansas issue formed the core topic of their “Great Debates.” Despite this attention, a gap exists in the scholarly coverage of the Kansas struggle. In focusing solely upon either the violence in Kansas or the territorial conflict in the national political arena, historians have offered an unbalanced—and thus incomplete—portrayal. Furthermore, by concentrating on antislavery Kansans, they have largely ignored the perceptions of Missourians, who formed the largest portion of the Kansas population until well into 1855, other than their near blanket denigration as “border ruffians” or “pukes,” undemocratic savages who ravaged a virgin Kansas to perpetuate slavery in the West. Though recent studies have begun to correct the oversight, scholars continue to employ Daniel Crofts’s Reluctant Confederates as the modern standard on the secession crisis in the Border South, though the book omits from its interpretive scope the slave states that did not secede from the Union.


By casting Missourians as uniformly proslavery and thus by default as Southern, historians have oversimplified not only Missourians’ motives and actions but also, more important, the social and ideological evolution of the very border region they occupied. Historians have interpreted Southernness through a number of lenses, including: a lingering frontier experience and the violent culture associated with it; a humid climate capable of sustaining cash crops (and thus the prevalence of slavery); a predominantly rural, agrarian population (without cities and industry); white cultural homogeneity derived largely from the absence of European immigration in the nineteenth century and the presence of a large African American population (which produced a form of herrenvolk democracy and an attendant virulent racism); a militant opposition to reform that included education; and a potent evangelical tradition that instilled a strong conservatism and resistance to change. Like much of the region that would come to be known as the Border South, Missouri’s experience through the mid-nineteenth century embodies a number of these theories but directly contradicts others. If anything, the story of the Border (with Missouri being especially instructive) offers a window into the complex process by which the South and West became separate entities despite their shared cultural past.

While the process itself was fluid, with distinctions between Southern and Western blurring during the antebellum struggle over slavery’s expansion, for residents of the Border region (described aptly in 1861 by one Northern observer as “North of South”), Southernness was itself only the end product of a complicated process driven less by culture than by the politics surrounding the institution of slavery. Ironically, the competing definitions of democracy in the West—and slavery’s place within them—that rent the nation and sent tremors across the West’s political landscape precipitated in large sections of Missouri a transformation of its residents’ collective identity from one predominantly Western to self-consciously Southern. For Missourians especially, the Kansas conflict was a cardinal component of the process through which this identity shifted. Through Kansas, itself a capstone of

---

the national struggle over slavery's extension into the West, Missourians tied sympathetic strands (including conceptions of slavery, the federal government, and the West itself) that had bound them loosely to the South into a new political identity. Though Northerners first characterized slaveholding Missourians as Southerners (an appellation they initially resisted), the Kansas experience caused many white Missourians to move from being Southern sympathizers to being avowed Southerners.4

Through the mid-nineteenth century, white Missourians wore their Westernness on their proverbial sleeves. The combination of the lure of the frontier, the freedom of movement in the vast domain, the exertion of independence from family and other forms of authority, perceived economic opportunities in the form of land, and the intoxication of conquest had for generations given frontier settlers, whether from the low country into the piedmont, from the Massachusetts Bay to the Narragansett country, or from the Chesapeake across the mountains into the Bluegrass, a source of pride in being Westerners. In the era of Jacksonian ascendance, the West represented the bastion of democracy. In this new Eden, away from the corruptive influence of society, the free individual exercise of "natural rights" offered those who migrated the chance to mold a society in which people could govern themselves with the least possible hindrance. With classic liberal thought, these new pioneers believed that an individual was more important than any institution, especially government. Personal liberty—the West's staff of life—involved an inherent intolerance or, at best distrust of governmental or other intrusion. As much as any other regional group, these Westerners suffered the Lockean conundrum of supporting limited government to protect individual rights while considering governmental power the greatest threat to those rights. Such logic moved Howard County, Missouri, politico Duff Green in 1819 to offer a hiring toast just as he called for an unrestricted statehood for Missouri: "The Union—It is dear to us, but liberty is dearer."5

Yet these Westerners' concept of democracy proved inherently undemocratic. As "rugged individualists" defined liberty according to the exigencies of their lives in the Far West, theirs was a democracy of opportunity, devoted to the principle of free access to the means of advancement, rather than to its actual achievement. In


reality, of course, not all were equal, and no democracy existed in truth, yet the illusion of accomplishment, quite apart from any achievement of actual success, fortified their notions of independence. This Western philosophy was thus a peculiar hybrid: at once individualistic, democratic, and egalitarian while innately traditional, hierarchical, and conservative. One Missourian attributed this distinct brand of Western democracy to “the mixed nature of our population... consisting of individuals thrown together—from various quarters, possessing more than an ordinary spirit of intelligence and enterprise, bent upon personal aggrandizement, in the pursuit of wealth or fame or ready (with some honorable exceptions) according to the Western phrase, to take all advantages.”

Many Missourians firmly rooted their opportunistic support for their region’s democratic promise in continued governmental support for frontier slaveholding. These residents, as opposed to their counterparts in the upper Middle West (who moved there from regions now largely devoid of chattel bondage), saw slavery as perfectly consistent with or even essential to frontier development. Slave labor offered a distinct advantage to those who sought to tame the wilderness for economic benefit. While not all possessed slaves, the prevailing theory held that with diligence, thrift, and sagacity anyone could obtain them. Individuals who obtained slaves initiated progress—for themselves and society—as much as any Northern free-labor ideologues. The democracy thus envisioned by these Westerners in effect justified inequality based upon slaveholding. If anything, this oppression offered the opportunity to establish their supremacy in the leveled atmosphere of democratic egalitarianism. Despite Alexis de Tocqueville’s claim that slavery was simply out of step with American democratic notions and that the westward march of progress would ultimately cause it to collapse from its incompatibility with democratic principles, millions of Westerners most decidedly did not reject slavery as incongruent with democratic ascendance. Rather, they embraced the institution as perfectly consistent with the egalitarian social progress they associated implicitly with the promise of Western expansion.

While their culture might have derived largely from a slaveholding heritage sectionalized to the extent that in common parlance their institution was “peculiar” to the South, Missourians still considered themselves and their state part of the West. More specifically, during the sectional era, they considered themselves


part of the Middle West—"the heart of the American continent," as one put it. Embodied in town names such as Westport, Weston, and even the German Americans' Westphalia, this conscious regional identity was articulated best by James S. Rollins, a Boone County proslavery politico, who cautioned his son, a cadet at West Point, to "say to the Northern and Southern cadets—that you belong to neither section—that you are a true son of the great West." Semantically, rural Missourians—even those in the Boon's Lick, the Missouri River counties that formed the state's slaveholding heart—regarded the South and certainly the North as distinct, even foreign, regions from their own. One proposal submitted to the Missouri House claimed that Missouri, "being one of the most north western Slave States... occupies a central portion in this grand valley of the Mississippi [whose] geographical position in this Union presents a unit in interest, whether considered commercially, socially or politically—such a unity of interest can never be permanently severed." Even David Rice Atchison, considered Missouri's Southern rights champion, responded to arguments linking Missouri with the South by quickly reminding a Middle West colleague in the Senate who had differentiated his region from those practicing slavery that Missouri was indeed "one of the northwestern States, although it is generally, from its institutions, classed as one of the southwestern States." True to its Western identity and to its pledge to "take a just and conservative position... and arrest the fire brands hurled by the violent and fanatical portion of the North and the South," Missouri sent no representatives to a "Southern convention" held at Nashville in 1850, though the topic of debate concerned the maintenance of slavery.8

The case of Atchison illustrates the quixotic position of slavery in the state, as well as its influence on the residents' view of the state's place in the Union. Upon ascending to the Senate, Atchison adopted John C. Calhoun's rhetoric, assisted in the drafting of the South Carolinian's 1849 "Southern Address," and then was the lone Missourian to sign it and actively champion its doctrines in his home state. He avowed that "as a Senator from Missouri and as a citizen of a Slave State, it is my duty to resist every attempt to change her institutions, and every assault upon her rights" and that he "expect[ed] always to be found acting with the Southern men in the Senate chamber and out of it, in defence of the rights of the Southern States." However fiery his words, Atchison did not adopt Calhoun's world. He was no planter in Missouri's reckoning, much less that of the plantation states, and was not even a farmer but a bachelor lawyer and circuit court judge before attaining the Senate in 1843. Son of a small slaveholding yeoman from the Bluegrass, Atchison had moved from Kentucky to far western Clay and Platte Counties, vestibules to the slaveholding Missouri River counties. Atchison quickly became a spokesman for the region's

common whites and, in words and deeds he proved indistinguishable from the fire-eaters of South Carolina and Mississippi in his defense of slavery. Yet one incontrovertible fact set him decidedly apart from the rabid cotton state defenders of the peculiar institution: Atchison owned at most one bondman.9

That Atchison was a small or even non-slaveowning Missourian does not suggest that he failed to embrace slavery. Indeed, he and thousands like him thought just the opposite; if anything, the comparatively small number of slaves in Missouri seemed only to magnify the institution’s importance. Atchison’s support of Calhoun coincided with a precipitous proportional downturn in the state’s slave holdings. In 1850, slaves represented 12.8 percent of Missouri’s total population, down from more than 15 percent a decade before. By 1860, after waves of immigrants had poured into the state, Missouri’s slaves accounted for just 9.6 percent of its residents, the smallest proportion of all slave states save Delaware. More to the point, in that year slave-owning families represented just 18.4 percent of the state’s total, lowest of any of the slave states save Delaware and a far cry from South Carolina, where more than half of all free white families owned bondpeople. By 1860, Missouri’s 24,000-odd slaveholders constituted just 2.3 percent of its total free population and their families 12.5 percent of Missouri’s white families.10

Atchison’s peculiar crusade for the peculiar institution was no mere charade to win political support among slaveholders or anyone else. That Missouri’s most ardent defender of slaveholding was himself barely, if at all, the master of slaves offers a revealing insight into the complex evolution that the issue of slavery had undergone in the minds of Missourians, slaveholding and not. Despite the proportional decline of the slave population in Missouri during the final antebellum decades, raw numbers of slaves in Missouri actually increased during the same period, and they did so

9. Atchison in *Liberty Tribune*, June 29, 1849, quoted in Parrish, *David Rice Atchison*, 79–80, 1–5; Paul C. Nagel, *Missouri: A Bicentennial History* (New York: Norton, 1977), 126; Harrison A. Trexler, *Slavery in Missouri* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1914), 43–44; Sixth U. S. Census, 1840, Population Schedule, Clay County, Missouri, NA; Seventh U. S. Census, 1850, Population and Slave Schedules, Platte County, Missouri, NA; Eighth U. S. Census, 1860, Population and Slave Schedules, Clinton County, Missouri, NA. Atchison does not appear on any of the federal censuses. William Freehling suggests that three bondmen lived in the Washington boarding house that Atchison shared with fellow senators, Virginians William O. Goode and James M. Mason and South Carolinian Andrew P. Butler, but he does not indicate that any of these slaves belonged to Atchison. Indirect evidence suggests that he might have had a personal servant named George. By August 1865, Atchison clearly had slaves in his possession; but it is unclear whether he or his brother owned them. See Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 550; Andrew P. Butler to Atchison, Mar. 5, 1856, David Rice Atchison Papers, Ms. 71, folder 6, Western Historical Manuscripts Collection, Joint Collection—State Historical Society of Missouri/University of Missouri, Columbia (hereinafter cited as SHSM); D. R. Atchison to William Atchison, Aug. 12, 1865, ibid., folder 6, SHSM, quoted in Parrish, *David Rice Atchison*, 220–21 (above quote), 115.

dramatically. Between 1830 and 1850, Missouri's slave population more than tripled to 87,422; by 1860, that number had increased by another third to 114,931, an all-time high. More than 35,000 of these persons labored in the central river counties of the Boon's Lick. Inflated prices of slaves offered no indication that chattel bondage was waning in Missouri. Indeed, prime field hands fetched routinely as much as $1,500 in Howard County, while annual prices for hired laborers caused one resident of Prairieville to write late in the decade that “everything is rising in value—especially negro property—hired labor went at most exorbitant prices on New Year's day—men generally at about $230 for the year.... Slave labor has never been any thing like so high.”

Given the proliferation of slavery in Missouri, and with roots sunk deeply in an ideological soil of individual and democratic rights, these Westerners found it easy to construct an active response to the threat that the antislavery host posed to their peculiar institution. Armed with their battle-cry of liberty, they waged war in this new sectional realm first against William Lloyd Garrison's undemocratic abolitionists, then against all free-state antagonists in their midst (including their own Thomas Hart Benton), who they condemned as subverting democratic ascendance in the West. "It was the fixed design of the Free States," Atchison howled, "not only to prevent the Slave States from any further participation in the Territories of the United States, but by a series of measures to reduce the latter to a state of helpless inferiority, and to subject them and their institutions to the mercy of Abolitionism. And that Missouri would be the first victim sacrificed upon the altar of this infernal spirit." Recognizing slavery's power in Missouri's consciousness, artist George Caleb Bingham remarked astutely in 1854 that "the slavery agitation is too convenient an instrument in the hands of demagogues to be dispensed with."

As the national debate over slavery drew the West into its scope during the agitation over Texas and the Mexican Cession, Missourians saw the controversy surrounding their own statehood thrust again into the national forum. The very boundary that marked their state's Southern border—the 36°30' parallel—became alternately the seed of harmony and discord between slavery's restrictionists and extensionists. As Congress debated the line again, this time across the vast territories acquired from Mexico, Missouri as a slave state was once again isolated between a northwestern region that forbade the institution and the remaining northern expanse of the Louisiana territory, where the very act that had breathed life into Missouri had barred slavery. As Missourians did all in their power to maintain their allegiance to the democratic Middle West, the nation's newest paroxysm over slavery forced them into the role of regional outsiders.


Yet Missourians refrained from adopting the language of division emanating with increasing volume from the cotton states. Cries of disunion and secession, grown louder during the territorial debate, met with stony silence in Missouri. Claiborne F. Jackson was forced to fend off widespread attacks as a “nullifier,” a once-democratic hallmark now linked to the Calhoun camp and thus condemned as being disunionist. He could not shake this charge, which cost him his seat in the Missouri senate as well as his candidacy for the U.S. House. More important, in their defense of slavery, Missourians embraced a strangely selective, even contradictory stance on federal and state power within the republic, one that accepted Congress’s authority to legislate on slavery while accommodating the various states’ rights to protect its residents’ property, so long as neither interfered with individual liberties. Slaveholding was one of those liberties. “I take the ground, that neither Congress, nor even the state in convention have anything to do with slave property, any more than any other species of property,” wrote John J. Lowry, a legislator from Fayette. “I assume that there is no such thing as absolute state sovereignty, . . . I am satisfied with the Missouri compromise, or any other compromise, if the people acquiesce in them, & they will sèment [sic] the Union of these states . . . This is high ground, . . . but it is the only tenable ground, which I can discover in accordance with the true rights of property.”

Seeking a middle ground in the growing struggle, Missourians espoused what Carl Degler has called a “peculiar Unionism,” maintaining steadfast loyalty to the Union while supporting slavery—and as yet the democratic process—as the foundation of liberty. In 1855, Boon’s Lickers called for a Union state convention for the purpose of “averting the calamities which a separation of the States would bring upon us”; a year before, residents of Weston had called a “Law and Order” meeting and declared unwavering fidelity to the government, taking as their motto “The Union first, Union second, and Union forever.” Yet because of the past decade’s debates, the politicized issue of slavery had become democracy’s litmus, weakening the ground upon which slavery and liberty had coexisted peacefully.

In an attempt to keep their footing as slaveholders and unionists, Missourians sought to convince the nation that a fourth section of the country existed apart from the North, South, and West—one that ameliorated the antagonistic influences in their daily lives and which, if recognized, could do so with the country as a whole. They regarded the middle, or border, states as a natural alignment of culture, heritage, climate, and geography. Most important, all were slaveholding states, as much from conviction as from economy, as Atchison’s case illustrates. As Senator Henry S. Geyer noted before the U.S. Senate, “south of 36°30” is the cotton region, where

---

14. Missouri Statesman, May 14, 1852; J. J. Lowry to M. M. Marmaduke, Sept. 8, 1848, Sappington Family Papers, box 5, MHS.
slave labor may be profitably employed... There, soil & climate settle the question;... but in the latitude above that and below 41° is the debatable ground. That is the latitude of the middle states—Virginia, Maryland, and Kentucky.” Able to separate themselves from the sectional debate over slavery, the middle border states, as Geyer saw them, “should, and must, at no distant day, exercise a potent influence in giving tone, character and direction to our national legislation.” The concept of a middle confederacy of sorts as healer of the ailing nation appealed to many Missourians who felt caught in the increasingly vituperative sectional climate. More important, the concept vindicated their place as virtuous slaveholders within the republic.16

Yet as the nation cleaved over the issue of chattel slavery, Missourians found themselves squarely in two lines of fire, one from the abolitionists who aimed at slaveholders in general and another from the Free Soilers who targeted slaveholding Westerners directly. Missourians heard in Northern condemnations of the institution the cant of an accepted superiority of their free society over the slave society of the South. Free labor and Free Soil advocates in Washington condemned Southern slave society as socially stagnant, without incentive and degrading to laborers, and touted the West as holding the future greatness of America—a vista achieved only by the prohibition of slavery from the region. One person from the Old West, Ohioan Salmon P. Chase, held that a free West, devoid of slavery, would offer “freedom not servitude; freeholds not tenancies; democracy not despotism; education not ignorance... progress, not stagnation or retrogression.” From St. Louis, Frank Blair proclaimed boldly that “the wealth and the political power of the country will in a little time reside at its Geographical centre,” later noting almost wistfully that once crossing the river into Illinois, one could not view “the splendid farms of Sangamon and Morgan, without permitting an envious sigh to escape him at the evident superiority of free labor.”17

More offensive to proslavery Missourians than any moral or economic denigration was that the Northern assault on slavery and the restrictionist effort intrinsically relegated slaveholders to the status of numerical inferiors. Indeed, Atchison became John C. Calhoun’s Southern rights standard-bearer not from any long-standing belief in his or Missourians’ general Southern heritage, but because of the specter of a Northern majoritarianism. Calhoun’s “Disquisition on Government”—which argued that too much liberty in the hands of those unfit to exercise it was democracy’s curse—put the matter in language unmistakable to these beleaguered Westerners. The charge of inferiority, combined with the attempt to limit slavery’s extension, caused Missourians to see the Northern antislavery element as a tyrannical majority intent upon oppressing an enlightened minority. In attempting to limit the South’s ability to carry its property wherever it chose, the North was clearly limiting its con-

stitutional freedoms. Denying slaveholders their constitutional right to property, and thus to freedom, was in effect the denial of equality, yet another proof that Free Soilers, not slaveholders, intended to destroy democracy in the nation.¹⁸

To Missourians, democracy had, in effect, empowered a culturally inferior yet numerically superior people, extending them the right and the power by virtue of the mass franchise and electoral policy to claim the nation's future. The unfit in the sectional era were antislavery Northerners, especially those influencing the national government as they sought to “monopolize” the territories. Already bordered by two free states and with the prospect of a third on the west as mandated by the Missouri Compromise, Missouri appeared inevitably doomed as a slaveholding peninsula in an angry sea of free-soil Westerners. Both Atchison and Geyer grasped this portent firmly. In the debate over the organization of Nebraska, Atchison (echoing his late captain, Calhoun) vowed to “oppose the organization or the settlement of that Territory unless my constituents and the constituents of the whole South, of the slave States of the Union, could go into it upon the same footing, with equal rights and equal privileges, carrying that species of property with them as other people of this Union. . . . I will vote for a bill that leaves the slaveholder and non-slaveholder upon terms of equality.” Geyer argued similarly: “The antagonism and hostility between the States and the people, engendered by the agitation of the slavery question,” he charged, “is aggravated by hostile legislation and the struggle for political power by a sectional party warring upon the institutions of one half the States of the Union.”¹⁹

The defense of individual white minority rights in the republic—with slavery at the notion’s heart—soon drew Missourians into a general acceptance of the concept of Southern rights, which entailed defiance against the majoritarian authority. More ominously, its sympathetic and widespread use in country parlance suggested a retreat from the Middle Western identity that had so shaped its past and a move toward a distinctive identity based upon separation—party and otherwise—from its once-Western moorings. In the heat of the sectional debate, that identity clearly sympathized with the plight of the beleaguered South. One Democratic editor saw the need to clarify for his Boon’s Lick readers the specious political nature of this newfound Southern affiliation: “Many conscientious men both Whigs and Democrats doubted the policy of repealing the Missouri Compromise; but our idea is that all those of every party who acquiesce in that repeal, and who are opposed to interfering with the question any longer, are good friends to . . . ‘Southern rights,’ as


they are termed; ... yea, as good friends as any others; for therein consists the test of loyalty to the South." In response, one western Missouri newspaper adopted as its moniker, *Southern Advocate.*

Missourians found solace in the imagery of victimization embedded in the concept of Southern rights. As Congress again wrestled over slavery's extension into the Mexican Cession, Missourians—now condemned by abolitionists as moral degenerates and by Free Soilers as economic irrationalists—grew impassioned with the recollection of Northern contempt and diminution during their state's natal struggle. Clearly, as Henry S. Geyer dutifully reminded his Senate colleagues, "there were some in western Missouri who remembered how little their rights were respected by the North in the memorable struggle of 1820." William B. Napton echoed these sentiments, claiming that "the injustice of the old Missouri Compromise is manifest from its very terms. It recognizes the great principle of popular sovereignty south of the line of 36°30'—but north of that line establishes a guardianship over the people and imposes an absolute restriction. It is as much adverse to the spirit of our Constitution as the famous Wilmot Proviso." Anathema to egalitarianism, the North's concert of exclusion against the South quickly conjured among Missourians their ancestors' own revolutionary struggle against a tyrannical majority. Indeed, Napton defended "the great principle of popular sovereignty, for which our ancestors in the revolution fought."^21^

Yet this new struggle did not yet signal a new revolution, at least not against the Federal government. Rather, democratic Missourians believed they must act as sentinels against antislavery zealots bent upon the Union's destruction. "Certainly it is not the part of a good patriot to do anything, or say anything," Napton cautioned, "by which the tendency to disunion may be hastened—and it is well enough to hold up in terrorem all the evils which fertile imagination may conceive, as to the necessary results of such an occurrence." John J. Lowry's condemnations of Benton echoed the same themes: "Col. Benton is the Disunionist then, & not the Legislature of Mo. & Mr. Calhoun!... He will divide the Democracy of this Union & be the cause of a Dissolution [sic] of the confederated states! No patriotism, no philanthropy, in brief a Calagula [sic] in North America in 1849.... I am for my country, for the Union & for the constitutional rights of the whole of the people of the confederated states!"^22^

Positioned on the vulnerable border, Missourians remained vigilant against those, proslavery and not, who manipulated to their own advantage the debate over slavery's extension into the West. The editor of the *Glasgow Weekly Times* cautioned readers: "whilst we are as decidedly and as unalterably opposed to Abolitionism, 'Freesoilism' and all sorts of slavery agitations as any live man on the face of the

---


21. Congressional Globe, 34th Cong., 1st sess., appendix, 465; Napton Diary, folder 1, 78–79, MHS.

22. Napton Diary, folder 1, 78–79, MHS; J.J. Lowry to M. M. Marmaduke, July 26, 1849, Sappington Family Papers, box 5, MHS.
earth, we, nevertheless, regret to hear the charge of Abolitionism and Freesoilism applied indiscriminately to all men who do not feel disposed to threaten "blood and thunder" against every man hailing from a free State, and especially against those who, whilst they believe that Congress has the constitutional power to legislate upon the subject of slavery in the Territories, are yet decidedly opposed to its exercise." Indeed, in 1853 Claiborne E. Jackson found himself forced to explain his understanding of the term "Free Soil" on the floor of the state senate, after having used the charge ubiquitously against political opponents. Jackson quickly equivocated, claiming that "he did not consider a man who believed Congress had the power to exclude slavery from the Territories of the United States a free soiler; but those who advocated the exercise of the power, were free soilers." 23

Yet as Northerners united against slavery and the slave power by adhering to the Free Soil movement, many Missourians heard more than condemnation of the South. They heard themselves condemned first as slaveholders then, by association, as Southerners. When Frank Blair, an ardent Free Soil Democrat who would soon take up and wave the Republican banner, was elected to Congress from St. Louis in 1856, the National Era hailed the victory as harbinger of regional, even national politics. It predicted confidently that the Border would soon become an antislavery, and thus Republican, bastion. "Our principles have become aggressive," trumpeted the paper's editor. "We no longer stand upon the defensive. We have crossed the line, and are upon slaveholding ground." The boast crossed lines indeed, appearing to Missourians a taunt. 24

Alarmingly, Northerners and Middle Westerners—in lumping Missourians together with the South as a result of one lone, shared institution—ignored the "identity of interest, feeling and destiny" that Missourians hoped still prevailed over the Western states. Northerners who dishonored Southerners by proclaiming their institutions, and thus their society, as inferior also dishonored Missourians who shared Southerners' commitment to chattel slavery. Considering theirs the freest society in the world, because of both their Western, rural residence and their pervasive egalitarianism and commitment to liberty, Missourians opposed the Free Soil arguments as slanderous attacks by an undemocratic host upon a free and loyal people. Listening to the widespread vituperation against the South and themselves, many Missourians at last began to consider their interests distinct from those of their Old-Northwestern neighbors and consistent with those of the beleaguered, slaveholding South. Ironically, while white Missourians resisted Northern influences in their society, their construction of identity owed much to the unwelcome Yankee rhetoric. 25

23. Glasgow Weekly Times, Mar. 29, 1855, Feb. 19, 1853; Missouri Statesman, June 15, 1855, Feb. 17, 1853; Hurt, Agriculture and Slavery in Little Dixie, 283.


Against this backdrop, Congress in 1854 debated the Kansas-Nebraska bill, which effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise by allowing popular sovereignty into the region long assumed as free from slavery. The bill triggered a congressional debate of a magnitude the nation had not seen since the fracas over Missouri's statehood. More important, the bill unleashed a sectional storm that would eclipse any controversy surrounding its passage. When Douglas forecast that "a hell of a storm" would attend his bill, he spoke strictly of the legislative fight. What he could not have foreseen was the bitter border war that would ensue in the Kansas Territory, revealing the impracticality of popular sovereignty. At the center of this national crisis, for a second time in a generation, lay Missouri.  

Missourians saw in the opening of Kansas several opportunities for progress. By allowing popular sovereignty to dictate the settlement of territories, Western agrarian settlers would forward their ideal of democratic promise and thus triumph over a distant, urban, industrial, and thoroughly inferior Northeast. One Missourian who homesteaded in eastern Kansas immediately after the territory's organization believed that proximity and concerted action would allow Westerners to stymie "the hosts of the Lazarroni from the Eastern States and Cities and paupers from Europe that will be thrown into this country, ... a curse equalling, at least, in its pestiferous character, the plagues of Egypt, in being made the unwilling receptacle of the filth, scum and offscourings of the East and Europe." Moreover, the Kansas-Nebraska Act signified to residents that, though challenged and even blunted for a time, the practicability of democracy had reasserted itself in its purest form, outside the invasive influence of government, whether national or state. "Let neither Congress, nor state conventions," exulted John J. Lowry, "enact any arbitrary laws to regulate property, then will our political institutions smoothly progress, & then will soil & climate point out where the slave-holders ought to locate." In Kansas, democratic liberty would triumph over influence.  

While residents of the Deep South attached symbolic political importance to winning Kansas, the matter carried far more immediate implications for Missourians because of their proximity to the storm's center. Indeed, Southern arguments that regarded the winning of Kansas as "a point of honor," a means of regaining parity in the Senate, or even a last, best hope for the spread of Southern culture and institutions in an expanding nation that had routinely constricted them both, overlooked a premise fundamental to Missourians. Simply put, they saw Kansas as a gift—to them. The term commonly used by Missourians when debating Kansas—"the Goose question"—connoted the sense of largesse implicit in the Kansas issue, in this case the ultimate Christmas gift, a goose plucked for the holiday repast. By

27. William Walker to David R. Atchison, July 6, 1854, David Rice Atchison Papers, MsS. 71, folder 4, SHSM; J. J. Lowry to M. M. Marmaduke, Sept. 8, 1848, Sappington Family Papers, box 5, MHS; Cecil Fronsman, "Death to All Yankees and Traitors in Kansas," 25–27.
virtue of the natural progress of American westward expansion, Missourians claimed a “natural right” to expand into the territory immediately west of them. Just as Virginians had settled Kentucky, North Carolinians had settled Tennessee, and Iliinoisans and Ohioans had settled Iowa, Missourians would settle Kansas. As William B. Napton noted in 1850, in the midst of the debate over the Mexican Cession, “the natural order of events” would have brought slaveholding Southerners into that newly-acquired region had not Northern machinations interrupted the process by claiming California.28

Even more troublesome to Missourians was the notion that if Kansas should not become a slave state, Missouri would become the first and only slave state bordering a free state to its west, effectively sealing slavery from further ingress and changing forever the complexion of westward expansion. Napton certainly recognized the implications. “If we cannot carry slavery into Kansas,” he reasoned, “it is quite obvious that we cannot succeed anywhere else. The result will be that no more slave states will be created. The majority of the North over the South will in a few years become overwhelming, in both houses of Congress. This majority can mould the Constitution to their own purposes. What will constitutional guarantees be worth under such circumstances?” This precedent threatened to be weighty, leading Missourians to conclude that Kansas, by mandate, was theirs to shape. Atchison declared to a Northerner who opposed slavery in Kansas “that I and my friends wish to make Kansas in all respects like Missouri. Our interests require it. Our peace through all time demands it, and we intend to leave nothing undone that will conduce to that end and can with honor be performed. . . . We have all to lose in the contest; you and your friends have nothing at stake.”29

The nearly immediate mobilization of emigrant aid companies in New England threw Missourians into a frenzy, in part from the fear that the interlopers would entice their bondpeople to escape. Hundreds, even thousands, of these “Hessian bands of mercenaries . . . sent here as hired servants, to do the will of others” were poised “to pollute our fair land, to dictate to us a government, to preach Abolitionism and dig underground Rail Roads,” William Walker predicted. Indeed, even before Congress authorized settlement in Kansas, Claiborne F. Jackson wrote to Atchison that “I say let the Indians have it [Nebraska] forever. They are better neighbors than the abolitionists, by a damned sight. If this is to become ‘free-nigger’ territory, Missouri must become so too, for we can hardly Keep our negroes here now.” In turn, Atchison wrote Jefferson Davis later in 1854 that “the men who are hired by the Boston Abolitionists to settle and abolitionize Kansas will not hesitate, to steal our slaves.” This prompted Atchison to counsel one group of prospective emigrants


29. Napton Diary, folder 3, 208, MHS; Atchison quoted in Parrish, David Rice Atchison, 162.
from western Missouri “to give a horse thief, robber, or homicide a fair trial, but to hang a negro thief or Abolitionist, without judge or jury.”

While the prospect of abolitionists stealing slaves was bad enough, Missourians found far more detestable the well-publicized method by which the New Englanders organized their swarming. With a capitalization of five million dollars approved by the Massachusetts legislature, and plans for mills, a hotel, a newspaper, towns, and tens of thousands of subsidized settlers, the emigrant aid societies intended nothing resembling squatter sovereignty. Rather, they appeared intent upon replicating in the West the modernizing Northeast. Indeed, the Squatter Sovereign forecast Kansas’s grim future if invading urban yankes gained sway. They would create, according to him, “sores in the body politic . . . [with] great wealth gathering in the hands of the few, the toiling millions struggling for bread; the one class is corrupted by luxury, the other debased by destitution.” Northern hirelings, pawns of Northern money, could never be free, independent men of the land and thus had no legitimate rights in the West.

Most ominous to Missourians, though, was the grim realization that their “vilest enemies” would now use the democratic process to usurp popular sovereignty as the Missourians understood it. As one Missouri Kansan predicted, “the Abolitionists will compass sea and land[,] heaven & hell to prevent the establishment of slavery in this Territory.” What Eli Thayer and Amos A. Lawrence, principals in the New England emigration, intended, indeed orchestrated, was an invasion, one initiated not so much to populate the region as to subvert the system on which they pinned their future, as well as the nation’s. In effect, just as Missourians breathed a sigh of relief that the Southern phalanx had at last dragooned Congress into making liberty and democracy once again consonant by means of popular sovereignty, New Englanders now threatened the vulnerable alloy. Industrial capitalism would now provide the edge over individualism; slavery would be its first casualty. To destroy slavery, not by competition but by the state-making process, free-labor Northerners would use two weapons against slaveholders: popular sovereignty (the democratic tool that Missourians believed would open the West to slavery) and state sovereignty (the slave states’ Cerberus as a minority within the republic). Ironically, the New Englanders’ strategy for Kansas had effectively boxed in the very slaveholders who championed the theoretical pragmatism of popular sovereignty in order to overturn the Missouri Compromise and open Kansas to settlement. Once events were underway, Missourians were forced to support the political orthodoxy of state sovereignty in order to guarantee the territory’s ultimate statehood, despite knowing that Northern settlement might doom slavery in Kansas. Indeed, as


Missourians saw it, the democratic process now threatened to consume the West's heart—liberty.32 Cornered and unable to oppose popular sovereignty or to trust the natural democratic order, Missourians lashed out furiously at the New England interlopers. "Kansas meetings" held throughout the state quickly led to the formation of "self-defensive societies" and, later, "blue lodges" and other secret societies which sought to prevent abolitionist emigrants from reaching Kansas. One historian has estimated that as many as ten thousand Missourians, including a thousand in Platte County alone, pledged allegiance to such organizations. William Walker wrote to David Rice Atchison from the settlement at Wyandotte, Kansas, just across the Missouri River from Westport, soliciting aid from the other slave states. "A heavenly time we will have of it if they gain the ascendency here!" Walker exclaimed. "I tremble when I contemplate the threatening prospect. Our Southern friends must be up and stirring. Virginia, Tennessee and Kentucky ought to send her hardy sons out to claim their rights and maintain them too. Missouri, as far as she can, is doing nobly for a new State."33

Walker's plea did not go unheeded; Missourians and men from other slave states formed emigrant aid companies of their own. At Atchison's urging, thousands of Missourians crossed the Kansas border to claim exemptions or to vote illegally in territorial elections. Newspapers sounded the proslavery call. "We are in favor of making Kansas a 'Slave State' if it should require half of the citizens of Missouri, musket in hand, to emigrate there," declared the Liberty Democratic Platform. The editor of Howard County's Glasgow Weekly Times reminded residents in the summer of 1854 that "if Missourians desire Kansas to be slave territory, they must do something more than hold public meeting, and pass high-sounding resolves; they must be on the move, and that speedily." As the territorial elections approached the following spring, he employed a more urgent tone: "If we would protect our hearth-stones, and defend our most sacred principles, we must act promptly. Let no one hug any longer the defensive hope of security, for there is none; already the torch of desolation has been lighted, and is now in the hands of fanatics...[and] nothing but prompt and determined action on our part can avert a catastrophe...Kansas should be a slave State, but it will take slavery votes to make it so...There is no time for delay—and those who do not expect to go there at present, if at all

should assist those who intend, and want to go this spring, in getting off immediately." Once the voting fraud in Kansas became known, eliciting widespread condemnations from Northerners, Missourians refused to disavow their obstructionism, whether illegal or violent. In fact, they justified it vigorously as a virtuous defense of liberty against the undemocratic New Englanders. One Linn County meeting claimed to "deeply regret the necessity for any action on our part against any considerable portion of the citizens of the United States; but such has been the course of the Abolitionists and Free Soilers, that duty to ourselves and families and a love for the Union of States require it of us, at the present time." A Boone County Democratic meeting justified the actions of the Missouri voters in Kansas, claiming they were merely "neutralizing said abolition efforts, and preventing the fraud attempted by the importation of hireling voters into that territory." Similarly, a meeting held in Fayette offered eighteen resolutions, the second of which "heartily approve[d] the action of our friends who met in Kansas, and defeated the machinations of the enemies of the Union and equal rights, the 'aid society' emissaries, thereby maintaining the principles of the constitution and the Kansas bill, by which that Territory is recognized as common property open to settlement by citizens of all the States."^^

The resolution offers a revealing insight into what had clearly become these Missourians' sectionalized construction of democracy, a crucial component in their adoption of a Southern identity. Though admitting that the territories, including Kansas, were open to the settlement of all, not all were indeed welcome. Only those who advocated extending slavery into the West would be allowed to settle in the region. Such a conception now transcended old sectional lines to embrace only those who understood the democratic process, those not bastardized by the corruptive influences of industrialization. "Companies coming from slave States," wrote John H. Stringfellow in *Squatter Sovereign,* "will be heartily welcomed by our citizens, as well as those from free States who are all 'right on the goose.'" "The 'emigration Aid society,'" Stringfellow warned, "who come without means and with Utopian anticipations and are sadly disappointed and curse the men who sent them hither." Only Westerners and Southerners, the agrarian backbone of the nation, would gain free access to the fruits of Kansas; their beliefs on slavery would be the litmus.

Defenders of liberty in Missouri targeted New England abolitionists, debauchers of the democratic process, and not Free Soil Westerners, procreators of this greatest and yet most vulnerable of American systems. Drawing great distinction between free state emigrants, Stringfellow charged, "We are not contending against the honest, but mistaken Free Soiler, but with the scum and filth of the Northern cities;
sent here as hired servants, to do the will of others; not to give their own free su-
frage.” “No one can fail to distinguish between an honest, bona fide emigration,
prompted by choice or necessity,” he snarled, “and an organized colonization with
offensive purpose upon the institutions of the country proposed to be settled.”
“There will be many a good citizen settle among us from Illinois, Indian[al], and
Ohio,” Stringfellow advised, “whose notions of slavery are parallel with our own.”
Westerners, the virtuous majority, would save democracy from the hands of a con-
spiratorial, corrupted minority. Kansas offered their best hope.38

Once the bloodshed in Kansas brought ill repute to Missourians, Northerners
condemned them not just as slaveholding sinners, but as frontier savages, barbaric
bullies and uneducated “pukes.” The caning of Massachusetts senator Charles
Sumner in defense of free-state Kansas only confirmed the notions of most North-
erners that Missourians were indeed Southerners. The event entwined in public
perception the slaveholding perpetrators of the Kansas and Sumner crimes. Con-
demned as violent Southerners, many Missourians during the Kansas conflict in-
ternalized the characterization in a fuller political sense. They looked beyond New
Englanders or Northerners as the enemy of liberty and democracy in the West and
toward the Federal government. An angry group of more than two hundred
slaveholders from twenty-six counties assembled in Lexington in July 1855 to con-
demn abolitionism, but their rhetoric pledged them to a conflict that transcended
the current one in Kansas. Calling slavery a “God-given . . . Natural right,” James
Shannon, president of the convention and of the state university at Columbia, ar-
gued that neither individuals nor governments could interfere. “Let us hope for the
best, and prepare for the worst;” Shannon exhorted the audience, “and then having
done all that men can do to save the Union, if a dissolution is forced upon us by do-
mestic traitors . . . then I, for one say . . . having exhausted the argument, we will stand
to our arms.”38

As the struggle for Kansas revealed painfully to Missourians, the promise of de-

cracy would not be realized in the West. Constant exertions, including armed for-
ays into Kansas, continued interference with territorial elections, and recurrent vio-

cence in the hopes of intimidating abolitionist residents, did not stem what became a
flood-tide of antislavery migration. Yet this influx came not from New England, but
from the Western states, the same pragmatic people that Missourians had predicted
would support slavery in Kansas. These free-staters, well outnumbering proslaver)
settlers in Kansas, waged their own war with the proslavery element in the territory,
repudiating the legislature and ultimately forcing a congressional showdown when
Kansas applied for statehood in 1857. By the time the territorial legislature proffered
its ill-fated Lecompton Constitution to Congress for approval—with its infamous

37. Squatter Sovereign, Mar. 6, Oct. 16, 1854, Feb. 20, 1855; Morrison, Slavery and the American West,
169-78.
38. Fellman, Inside War, 13; [James Shannon], An Address Delivered before the Pro-Slavery Convention
of the State of Missouri, Held at Lexington, July 13, 1855, on Domestic Slavery (St. Louis: The Convention,
1855), 18-19, 32; Hurt, Agriculture and Slavery in Little Dixie, 283-86, 287-88.
option to vote "for the Constitution with slavery, or for the Constitution without slavery"—even Missourians grudgingly conceded that the proslavery clauses in the document no longer reflected the constituency of Kansas and condemned the document as undemocratic. "All this is . . . the work of a few political demagogues," declared the Jefferson Inquirer, "who are seeking to bring about a dissolution of the Union, and are reckless of the means to which they resort to accomplish their purpose." For the sake of the Union, Missourians accepted, however bitterly, Kansas's destiny as a free state.^[39]

More lasting than their dashed hopes for Kansas was these Missourians' newfound identity. The Kansas conflict completed the process through which Missourians moved far beyond mere sympathy for the South and advocacy of Southern rights; they had adopted the cant of Southernness. Prior to the 1840s, little evidence exists of Missourians having applied the term to themselves, in large part because the nation itself had not yet fully sectionalized so as to create the region in national consciousness. The term "Southern," as Missourians employed it initially, was a metaphor for slaveholder, regardless of the individual's political stance on slavery's extension. In 1844 the Kentucky-born Thomas Hart Benton responded defiantly to his free state antagonists by affirming that "I am Southern by birth; Southern in my affections, interest, and connections. . . . I am a slaveholder, and shall take the fate of other slaveholders in every aggression upon that species of property." Similarly, Free Soiler Frank Blair, also a native Kentuckian and slaveholder, proclaimed that "I am a southern man by birth, and identified with southern institutions by my interest and education."^[40]

By the time of the debates over Texas, however, with the cant of abolitionism well amplified, Missourians took up the cognomen of Southerners more widely, yet still largely as a defense of the peculiar institution. Prior to the Kansas conflagration, Missourians generally claimed Southernness only when in the company of either those from the free states (who had so labeled Missourians solely as a result of their slaveholding adherence) or Northern-born Free Soilers. While Atchison proclaimed his Southernness defiantly in the presence of Northern colleagues in general, he limited usage of the term in the company of fellow proslavery Missourians. To the Democrats of Livingston County he offered his take on the recent Compromise of 1850: "Although in my opinion the slave States did not get equal and exact justice, yet we escaped dishonor and degradation. Let us hold our northern brethren to a strict observance of all the terms of settlement; they must comply with their part of the bargain." To another group, he affirmed that "as a Senator from Missouri, and as a citizen of the Slave States, it is my duty to resist every attempt to change her institutions, and every assault upon her rights." Atchison's deliberately selective use of language suggests that adherence to slavery did not yet warrant any exclusive Southern identity, at least not to others of the

same stripe. The employment of the terms “Southern” or “Southerner” by Missourians was reserved exclusively for the benefit of outsiders, those who now posed a threat to the institution.\textsuperscript{41}

Though even the most ardent of Missouri’s proslavery adherents refrained from using these terms with one another. Southern identity as ligature of the slaveholding imperative gained ascendance in much of the state. One observer offered a sectionalized geography primer on the influence which proslavery and emigration now had in the state’s politics, one that anticipated its new Southerness:

The northern tier of counties through which the Hannibal & St. J[oseph] road runs, after great accessions from northern emigration, is expected to cast their lot with the Emancipationists. But all recent developments of sentiment in this quarter indicate a very different state of public sentiment—there counties, especially the Eastern end of the tier, seem to be sound & firm & during the seven years war with Benton, our principal & most reliable strength lay in this quarter. The South West is expected to join in this crusade—simply because she supported Benton & has few slaves—but the South West is filled up with Tennesseans & Kentuckians, & although non slaveholders, I anticipate but little danger from them. The North West is also looked to—and I confess indications there are unfavorable. Their population is chiefly from Indiana, Ohio & Illinois—and they cannot be trusted—still, as long as the river counties maintain a firm posture, even with St. Louis & the North West to contend against, we may consider ourselves safe.\textsuperscript{42}

By the time of the Kansas furor, those who evinced anything short of wholesale support for slavery and its extension to the Western territories were subject to bitter political attack. Congressman James J. Lindley addressed the U.S. House in 1856 claiming that Missouri’s proslavery Democrats “assume to have taken into special custody the slave interest of Missouri, and freely denounce as Republicans and Abolitionists men of Southern education, slaveholders, and all others who do not conform to and maintain every arbitrary tenet which they set up;... I am charged by the orators & presses of the anti-Benton faction in Missouri as a Free Soiler—I who have been raised and educated to believe in the propriety of Southern institutions, and who have never uttered one word against slavery, either as it exists or in the abstract.”\textsuperscript{43}

Missourians born in nonslaveholding states proved especially vulnerable to questions about their affiliation. B. Gratz Brown captured this distinction most completely when responding to New York-born state senator Robert M. Stewart’s attack on Benton


\textsuperscript{43} Congressional Globe, 34th Cong., 1st sess., appendix, 673.
as an abolitionist. Brown—a Kentuckian—used the fact of Stewart’s Northern birth to throw doubt on his proslavery stance. Unlike Stewart, Brown argued, “I am a Southern man, in feeling and in principle, ... the place of my birth forbids the ridiculous nonsense of abolitionism!” Frank Blair noted that “the absconding abolitionists from the north, who, in my county at least, are the principle leaders of the Anti-Benton party, find it necessary to turn pro-slavery nullifiers to free themselves from the suspicion which attends their place of birth.” Blair then added smugly: “I can well afford to entertain the opinions of Washington and Jefferson, upon the subject of slavery, and to express them without incurring the suspicion of disloyalty to the institutions of the south.”

Both Brown and Blair were wrong about their immunity from suspicion attendant with their place of birth. Perhaps more than residents of any other state, Missourians of the late 1850s drew the sharpest distinction between their neighbors not based upon sectional identity, but upon their adherence or opposition to slavery. Mindful of their shared borders with two free states, one running north and south and the other east and west,—these Missourians felt they could not risk granting exemptions to anyone, even natives of slaveholding states. Atchison articulated the new Southernness, a hostility against all but those who supported slavery, whether within or without the state’s borders. “Put confidence in no man for any station of public trust,” he cautioned a group of supporters, “who is not known to be true to the institutions of the State and the rights of our citizens.” Indeed, with grim irony William B. Napton delimited the new Southern identity swirling about the once-Western state. “A man’s opinions are not to be determined by the place of his birth,” he observed: “Because a man is born and raised in a slave state does not prevent him from being a Free Soiler or an abolitionist. ... Kentucky is a slave state, yet I will venture that one half of the Kentuckians who emigrate here are Free Soilers—one fourth out-and-out abolitionists. They are not slave holders though born and raised in a slave state, and wherever they are they still entertain anti-slavery sentiments. ... The political adjuncts of the northern Free Soilers stay scattered here and there throughout the South and “born and raised” in slave states are the most dangerous of the whole tribe.”

The democratic process had robbed Missouri of its own progeny. With Kansas lost and their state isolated by 1860, Missourians sought redemption in their newfound political identity as Southerners, outsiders in a West that the Yankee government had spoiled—but not before one final act of retribution. In the fall of 1860, nearly six hundred St. Louis volunteers again marched grimly to the Kansas

border in a “Southwest Expedition,” to campaign against the hated “Jayhawkers” who now occupied Eden. A month earlier, they had elected as governor Claiborne F. Jackson, the ardent anti-Free Soiler, who articulated for Missourians the matured vision of their imagined community within the South:

The destiny of the slave-holding States of this Union is one and the same. So long as a State continues to maintain slavery within her limits, it is impossible to separate her fate from that of her sister States who have the same social organization. . . . The identity, rather than the similarity, of their domestic institutions; their political principles and party usages; their common origins, pursuits, tastes, manners, and customs; their territorial contiguity and commercial relations—all contribute to bind them together in one sisterhood. . . . Whatever may have been our prior differences, it seems to me, that the time has come when all true Southern men should be united as a band of brothers against the common enemy.

For many of Missouri’s residents, the events in Kansas pointed out clearly that common enemy. A new alliance had emerged, one uniting the Northern and Northwestern states in their conspiracy against slavery. No longer was the West a place of liberty; the democratic process that had once buttressed Missourians’ belief in Western independence now threatened the institution that to them embodied those liberties, and not only in the territories, but in the existing states as well. Angry and disillusioned, many Missourians would soon question and even withdraw their loyalty to the Federal government and the Union itself. These former Westerners turned to the region that now embodied their sense of betrayal—the beleaguered South—for more than comfort. Indeed, William F. Switzler, editor of Columbia’s Missouri Statesman, summarized his state’s newfound Southerness succinctly: “Of the South,” he declared, “we are for the South.” Ironically, while the identity of the South as a whole, in C. Vann Woodward’s time-honored argument, stemmed directly from historical events (in this case a post-Civil War experience of “frustration, failure, and defeat”), Missouri’s prewar experience suggests that scholars must reassess Woodward’s interpretation in that the timing of this process was driven in part by local circumstance. If events in Kansas provoked a reaction from the South as a whole, they most profoundly affected the evolving Southerners closest to the fray. By 1861, its rehearsal nearly complete, Missouri’s Southern identity was already well scripted.

