

In Defense of Union and White Supremacy: The Democratic Alternative to Free Soil, 1847-1860

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Before April 1861, no one saw the Civil War as inescapable. Cumberland County Democrats, like most northern Democrats, opposed the nation's division over slavery and tried to placate the South without alienating their constituents. Their strategy was avoidance or "nonintervention."¹ As their most important paper wrote, "We are opposed to all sectional sentiments, regarding the interests of all the States as identical, and *union* of the States as of more value than all else besides."² While Free Soil men wanted to shut slavery out of the western territories regardless of what the South thought, Union-minded Democrats argued for "popular sovereignty," that settlers, not Congress, ought to decide whether they would own slaves. After the debates of 1850, Democrats added to popular sovereignty the powerful *ad hominem* arguments that Free Soil men advocated "negro equality" and that they provoked disunion. Unfortunately for Cumberland County Democrats, their cause was defeated by dissension in their ranks and by a surge of support for Free Soil Republicanism between 1858 and 1860.

To a very large degree the views of Cumberland County Democracy during these years were the views of John B. Bratton, editor of the *American Volunteer* before 1846 and long after 1860. Bratton was more than an editor. He served a term on Carlisle's Borough Council as its president and represented Cumberland County on the small multi-county committees that chose the 1854 and 1858 Democratic congressional nominees.³ He once received a Democratic county convention's endorsement as candidate for state canal commissioner.⁴ Appointed Carlisle's postmaster by Presidents Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan, Bratton carried the prestige and the burden of speaking for those administrations.⁵ There was no one with such persistent influence in the Whig or Republican parties.

Popular sovereignty surfaced during the Mexican war as an alternative to Congress banning slavery in all the new territories (as proposed by Pennsylvania

Congressman David Wilmot) or even part of them. Remarking on a controversy between New York Democrats—"Hunkers" and "Barnburners"—over whether to give the South more slave territory by extending the Missouri Compromise line or to support the Wilmot proviso, the *Volunteer* asserted both sides were wrong. Slavery policy belonged to each state by virtue of its sovereignty. Congress had no power, "to declare where slavery shall exist, or where it shall not exist, in the acquisition of any territory by the Union." If it had such power, argued the *Volunteer*, it could abolish slavery in the states themselves. Why should Democrats quarrel over a non-issue? "The people of the acquired territory will decide that matter for themselves at last."⁶ This opinion's timing showed that John B. Bratton had connections at the highest levels of the Democratic party. The same day it appeared, the *Washington Union* printed a letter by Michigan governor and presidential candidate Lewis Cass announcing popular sovereignty to the entire nation.⁷ A little over two years later the *Volunteer* assured readers, "We would deprecate the extension of slavery as much as any one. But we had better wait until there is real and actual danger, before we estrange our southern brethren by a wild course of insult on this question." Even were there such a danger, "it is a matter that we have nothing to do with...each State is just as sovereign in her character as either Great Britain or America."⁸

At their meetings county Democrats repeatedly committed themselves to popular sovereignty.⁹ Few bucked their party to embrace free soil, as shown by the tiny 0.4 % of votes cast in 1848 for the Free Soil party. One of these few was William Mateer, co-proprietor with Jerome K. Boyer of Harrisburg of the *American Democrat*, Carlisle's other Democratic paper. Boyer had recently withdrawn from his partnership with Bratton in the *Volunteer*.¹⁰ The *Democrat* cannot speak for itself today because all issues before 1851 are missing, but the Whig (later Republican) *Carlisle Herald* noted, "Our neighbor of the 'Democrat' leans considerably toward the [Wilmot] Proviso..."¹¹ It was denounced at least twice by the *Volunteer* as "The American Democrat, alias Abolition Organ." A purported letter to the *Volunteer* from "A Buchanan Man" recalled the, "course pursued by that paper during the past summer [1847] in lending itself to promulgate Abolition sentiments..." However, the *Democrat* fell into line with the party after 1847 and supported popular sovereignty.¹²

Popular sovereignty was a marvelous device for friends of the Union. It would take slavery out of Congress, the point of conflict between North and South. It could also be held out to southerners as opening new ground to slavery and to northerners as allowing free-state settlers to exclude slavery.¹³ But the device had three flaws. Its notion that Congress had no power to interfere with slavery in the territories contradicted Congress's right to, "dispose of

and make all needful rules and regulations respecting the territory or other property belonging to the United States,” and ignored the precedents of 1787 and 1820, when Congress banned slavery in a territory.¹⁴ This flaw was cured ten years later by the United States Supreme Court in the Dred Scott case, in which Justice Roger B. Taney and five associates agreed with Bratton that Congress had no power to limit slavery.¹⁵

The second flaw was that if Congress could not restrict slavery, how could a territorial legislature that derived its authority from Congress do so? Some southerners claimed no territory could exclude slavery prior to its admission as a state.¹⁶ The third flaw was that unscrupulous men could corrupt a territory’s political processes, as later happened in Kansas.

Despite popular sovereignty’s failure to win the presidency for Cass, it carried the day in 1850, when the Mexican territories were organized. California was admitted as a free state, and New Mexico and Utah organized as territories without any congressional legislation on slavery. Both Democrats and Whigs supported these measures, though the latter did not endorse popular sovereignty.

Where Democrats differed greatly from Whigs was in vigorous, even cruel, support for the 1850 fugitive slave law. It was designed to enforce the United States Constitution’s requirement that any fugitive, “held to service or labor” in one state and escaping into another, “shall be delivered up on claim of the party to whom such service or labor may be due.”¹⁷ The new law denied the alleged fugitive any right to a jury trial, and permitted the case to be removed from free-state courts (which might be prejudiced against the claimant) and brought before a federal commissioner. The commissioner would receive a \$10 fee if he turned the alleged fugitive over to his alleged master, but only \$5 if he ruled against the claimant. Federal marshals chasing a fugitive were empowered to summon all citizens to aid the pursuit.¹⁸ Threatened by this unequal justice, even free, northern-born blacks could not rest easy.

A Carlisle man “well and favorably known in our borough for a number of years past,” Moses Jones, was arrested as a fugitive slave.¹⁹ He was set free by the federal commissioner when it turned out that he did not fit the fugitive’s description, but Carlisle blacks must have been impressed by the power of a distant slave-owner to attack their freedom.

At about the same time as the Jones case, the *Volunteer* rejoiced at the disappearance of “strange colored people,” from Carlisle.

Certain it is, however, that we do not now see the faces of many of the sturdy, lazy and insolent negro fellows, which were to be met at every corner during the summer months. *Then*, hordes of them were to be seen in the Market House and other public places, where darkies ‘most do congregate,’ loitering about in dissipation and idleness, or basking in the genial

sunshine of a summer's day, careless alike of the past, the present and the future. *Now*, the scene is changed, and we believe much for the better.²⁰

Those who remained were praised as mostly "industrious and economical" and assured that *their* rights would be protected. But middle class blacks less likely to run afoul of the fugitive slave law were also frightened; some left Carlisle for Canada.²¹ Bratton's hard-heartedness did have limits. When a fugitive slave was murdered in Columbia, Pennsylvania, and the state's leading Democratic paper defended the murder, the *Volunteer* protested.²²

Slave-catching was a state issue as well as federal. Many northern states, including Pennsylvania, had personal liberty laws meant to thwart the return of fugitive slaves to their owners. Pennsylvania's 1847 law forbade state judges to hear any case arising under the federal fugitive slave law of 1793 (to which the 1850 law was a supplement), prohibited using state jails to detain alleged fugitive slaves and criminalized forcible seizure of any "negro or mulatto" as a fugitive slave, even with the intent bringing that person before a federal court. The 1847 law also confirmed the right of detained fugitives to sue for a writ of habeas corpus and retracted a right of slave-owners, granted by Pennsylvania's 1780 abolition statute, to keep their slaves in Pennsylvania for six months.

The 1847 law was "illiberal and unjust towards the South", and violated federal law, said Democrats advocating its repeal.²³ After passage of a repeal bill through the state Senate (Bill No. 14), a similar bill was sponsored by Carlisle assemblyman J. Ellis Bonham; his speech was published in full by the *Volunteer*.²⁴ Bonham urged repeal as a "grateful peace offering to our Southern brethren," and rebuked the 1847 law's author for stirring up Carlisle's "McClintock riot". "In the county which I have the honor in part to represent in this floor, the passage of that act produced...one of the most fearful and terrific riots that ever occurred within the limits of that county...."

Bonham agreed with the Senate that the jurisdiction and anti-kidnapping sections of the 1847 law interfered with the federal fugitive slave act of 1793 and should be repealed. But he was dissatisfied with the Senate bill's repeal of the ban on using state jails to hold re-captured slaves because "abolitionist" sheriffs or jailers might still refuse to keep them. He proposed *requiring* officials to jail escapees as they would criminal suspects or any other prisoners. Bonham also went beyond the Senate bill by proposing to repeal the guarantee of habeas corpus as an unnecessary duplication of existing law and to restore slave-owners' right to hold slaves in Pennsylvania for six months. Though the latter issue was not one of constitutionality, it *was* one of courtesy. Before closing his speech, Bonham attacked the abolitionist argument that the Constitution's fugitive slave clause, which referred to "persons held to service or labor," did not include slaves but only those under a contract or other legal

obligation. He countered that the Constitution would not have been adopted if the South had not been satisfied by an understanding that slaves were included in the provision. Bonham asked sarcastically, "are we to turn round and defraud [southerners] of their rights under color of law and rob them of their property, and that too by the very terms of the instrument adopted for their protection?"

Pennsylvania would if Whig Governor William Johnston had his wish. He refused to sign the repeal bill and vetoed it just before leaving office.²⁵ After Johnston was replaced by Democrat William Bigler in 1852, the legislature tried again. Bonham repeated some of his earlier points on the House floor but also defended the 1850 Compromise generally, and attacked Pennsylvania's Whigs for undermining it. The North, he said, had gained far more than the South, including organization of Utah and New Mexico territories, which would probably be free states. He accused the Whigs of bad faith; while measures favoring the north were now irreversible, they were treating the new fugitive slave law as an open question. "They seem disposed to enjoy all the benefits conferred by that arrangement of sectional difficulties and to snatch away from the South the only portion of that compromise which could be beneficial to her interests."²⁶ He ignored, of course, the possible entry of Utah and New Mexico as slave states.

J. Ellis Bonham's second speech was not in vain; the personal liberty law of 1847 was repealed. A grateful state party appointed him chair of its Central Committee.²⁷ He was also nominated for Congress in 1854, but was defeated by Know Nothing candidate Lemuel Todd.²⁸

At all times the Democratic party was deeply hostile to abolitionism. Its press attacked again and again the notion—once spoken by New York Whig Congressman William Seward and more consistently advocated by abolitionists—that there was a "higher law" superseding the constitutional protection of slavery.²⁹ "We hate abolitionists—and indeed all kinds of individuals who are disposed to meddle illegally with the domestic institutions of the South—worse than the devil."³⁰ The worst insult hurled at Free Soil men like Governor Johnston was that they were abolitionists.³¹ A Newton free soil Democrat—W.W. Nevin—who dared run for state assembly on the Union (Whig/Know Nothing) ticket in 1856 was singled out for attack. "He is said to be strongly tinctured with abolitionism of the Greely and Garrison sort...."³² But before 1854 the party and press also blamed southern disunionists for sectional tensions. At a convention held February 26, 1850, and a meeting held August 22, 1853, Democratic resolutions linked abolition and free soil agitators with southern disunionists as fomenters of "fratricidal warfare."³³ The *Volunteer* likewise wished God would transport, "both classes of these lunatics," to Australia, while the *Democrat* advocated hanging a dozen each of abolitionists and southern

disunionists.³⁴ At times, southerners even came in for sole blame. After South Carolina's governor requested his legislature to appropriate money for armaments in late 1849, the *Volunteer* wrote, "He is a mad-man who talks about a dissolution of the Union. The people are sick and disgusted with the kind of *Southern argument* and laugh to scorn those who use it. Much of the excitement produced in regard to this question of slavery is owing to the appeals of hot-headed Southern men."³⁵ As South Carolina persisted in its drive for secession after the Compromise of 1850, the *Volunteer* wrote angrily

Should this step of South Carolina make civil war necessary, it will require both statesmanship and heroic determination on the part of the President of the United States [Millard Fillmore] to bring the difficulty to a speedy and successful termination... Before South Carolina will behave herself, she must be soundly trounced, and it will not take a few yankees of the North more than one day to accomplish this duty.

The *Volunteer* even asserted unfairness in the 1850 Compromise... toward the North. "In our opinion all the concessions were made in favor of the South: but still we shall not complain."³⁶

When South Carolina backed down and Pennsylvania repealed the liberty law of 1847, the cause of Union seemed safe at last. But it was not so. In early 1854 Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas proposed a bill to split off and organize Kansas out of the Nebraska territory and to repeal the 1820 ban on slavery in both places. The *Volunteer* joined that struggle on behalf of the bill.³⁷ It did not directly criticize the Missouri Compromise, but agreed with Douglas that the bill was a logical extension of the Compromise of 1850 because it put Nebraska (including the projected Kansas territory) on the same footing as Utah and New Mexico. Slavery's fate would be decided by the territory's people, not by Congress. "There ought to be no serious opposition to the bill among Democrats."³⁸ The paper later commented sarcastically on New England and Pennsylvania preachers who presumed to speak for God in excoriating the bill, and was seconded by the county party, which deprecated, "the semi-clerical influence in political affairs."³⁹

On August 28, 1854, the Democrats' county convention adopted a resolution reported by Bratton from the resolutions committee. "We have full confidence in the capacity of the people to govern themselves, and in the doctrine of popular sovereignty, as applied to the people of the territories, as well as of the States." The next year, another convention resolved that, "we, as Pennsylvanians, have nothing to do with the slave question, other than to protect every man in his rights to his own property, as the constitution and laws of the United States require and guarantee."⁴⁰

The Democrats' disregard of the Compromise of 1820 was consistent with their view that Congress should and could not outlaw slavery in the territories,

but they failed to see the difference between making a new compromise, as in 1850, and destroying an old one. By approving the Kansas-Nebraska bill, northern Democrats had left their middling position between Free Soil men and slavery advocates, and moved to appease the latter.

Democratic leaders did not see the bill as appeasement. In August 1854 the state Central Committee issued an address over the signature of J. Ellis Bonham:

As Pennsylvanians we are not advocates of the extension of slavery, and we deny that the principles of the Nebraska and Kansas bill produce that effect. It merely leaves it to the people to determine this question for themselves. But the soil, climate and production of that region are not adapted to slave labor [an oblique reference to cotton, tobacco and rice cultivation]. It is our firm belief that slavery will not enter those territories. Those who are sensitive on this point should not close their eyes to the evidence that surrounds them.⁴¹

The *Volunteer* claimed, rather dishonestly, “The South has no design to enter the contest for the control of those regions.”⁴² It later repeated the state party’s point that a “law of climate” prevented the slave from being taken into territory north of the latitude where his labor ceased to be profitable. No such law hindered white settlers, so that free states might even appear south of the Missouri Compromise line.⁴³ Showing disdain for Free Soil men (“It is political capital they desire to make, and not free States”), their warnings, and their efforts to encourage free soil emigration, the *Volunteer* urged, “We want to see Abolitionists going to Kansas in great numbers. We don’t like the institution. So, turn out, abolitionists. There is a wide field for you in the western wilds; and if you are sincere in your professions you will help to occupy it, and prevent the extension of slavery.”⁴⁴ Within a year and a half, John Bratton probably wished he could eat those words, as both pro-slavery and free-state settlers poured into Kansas and turned it into a battleground.

Democratic reasoning made no impression on many outraged northern voters, who gave their support to the free soil Republican party that took shape from 1854 to 1856. Democrats immediately pummeled the new party at its weak points. Unlike the Whigs, the Republicans were an entirely northern party that fomented disunion by its mere existence. “They say to the South, to be sure, half of this country is yours...but we (the Abolitionists) will not permit you of the South to even have a voice in the settlement of its domestic affairs [Kansas] or in the shaping of its constitution.” Because Republicans hoped to, and could, elect their candidate, John C. Fremont, by capturing the North, the *Volunteer* accused them of bearing a flag with only sixteen stars (out of thirty-one states).⁴⁵ Fremont’s election would, “beyond all question or doubt, effect a dissolution of the Union in less than six months.” Old-line Whigs (“honest

men who have heretofore acted with the opposition”) were asked to show their patriotism by voting Democratic in 1856, and later.⁴⁶

Union-saving was the positive side of Democratic propaganda. The negative was racism. Not only was the Republican party founded and supported by men with strong free soil or even abolitionist views, but some radical Republicans actually advocated political equality for blacks in the North. Local free soil men could be tarred by association with radicalism, real or fancied, outside the county. Republicans were “Black Republicans”, “negro Republicans” or even “woolly heads”.⁴⁷

On July 26, 1855, the *Volunteer* noted that abolitionists and Know Nothings had cooperated in disarming Irish militia in Boston and arming black militia in Rhode Island and Cincinnati, Ohio. “Down with the white man, and up the negro!” appears to be one of the watchwords of Know-Nothingism.” Playing off the Know Nothing slogan, “Americans shall rule America,” the paper remarked, “we have no fear the people will ever consent that *nigger* Americans shall rule America.”⁴⁸ Four months later Bratton’s paper commented on a planned poetry reading before the Boston Anti-slavery Society.

On the list of lecturers is the name of a *lady ob color* [sic], who is to read a new poem composed by Mrs. Harriett Beecher Stowe, of Uncle Tom notoriety. What a disgusting exhibition this is! These Boston fanatics, in their crazy zeal, intend to insult the intelligence of the country, by parading a miserable *wench* from city to city, to retail Mrs. Stowe’s abolition slang. And such men want to rule this great land! Thank Providence there is patriotism enough left in the land to keep these Yankee lunatics in their proper place.⁴⁹

A former Fremont supporter in West Chester, Pennsylvania, was said to have switched to Buchanan after meeting blacks at a Fremont rally bragging that they would be able to vote before long.⁵⁰ The *Democrat* attacked Republicans as closet abolitionists, who once in power would, “avow their devotion to *negrology* and all its *sweet-scented accompaniments*,” and “boldly assert their odious principles of universal equality.”⁵¹ Even superficially non-political pieces might condition the white male voter’s racist reflexes. In a story taken from the *New Orleans Picayune*, a deadly serious duel was given a comic twist because it involved two black men.⁵² It was thought amusing that two colored “gemmen” should imitate the social manners of their betters.

These appeals to the white male voter’s patriotism and racial pride helped county Democrats beat down their “freedom-shrieking” opponents in 1856 and 1857.⁵³ But then the trouble started. In Kansas, the pro-slavery convention at Lecompton prepared for statehood by adopting a constitution legalizing slavery without allowing a referendum (likely to be won by free-state settlers in the territory). The Buchanan administration balked at this, so the convention

added a referendum in which Kansas voters could choose whether or not their constitution would permit settlers to import new slaves. However, they would have no chance to vote down the constitution as a whole. Even the constitution “without slavery” enforced continued slavery for the few hundred slaves already in Kansas *and their descendants*, so Kansas voters could not truly exclude slave labor.⁵⁴ By blessing the referendum as proposed, Buchanan provoked a split in the northern Democratic party. The dissidents, committed to popular sovereignty—as was the administration in theory—rebelled against a less than free election process in Kansas. Admission of a slave state procured by fraud and against the wishes of most of its residents would destroy northern Democracy. Joining forces with Republicans in Congress, “anti-Lecompton” Democrats helped impose a compromise in which Kansans would have a chance to vote down the whole constitution. Vote it down they did, and Kansas remained a territory until 1861.⁵⁵

The Lecompton constitution was supported by Cumberland County’s Congressman, John A. Ahl of Newville.⁵⁶ The *Volunteer* supported it. “[N]otwithstanding it contains one or two features to which some object, we confess we can see nothing in it to raise a breeze about.” Since Kansans could vote down slavery, what more could Republican “shriekers” want? The latter were insincere in any case. “They desire Kansas to become a slave state, for they think they will then have an opportunity to assail the Administration and the national Democracy.”⁵⁷ If slavery were permitted, Kansans could always change the constitution later.⁵⁸ The *Democrat* also supported Lecompton.⁵⁹

The party fell into line at its March 1, 1858, convention. It resolved

That the Democracy of Cumberland County...whilst for themselves would ask the privilege of accepting or rejecting the constitution under which the expected to live, still would not set up their opinions as obligatory upon the citizens of any other State, conceding them the privilege or arranging their domestic institutions in any way most consistent with their own wishes or interest,...

In case anyone missed the point, the party further resolved approval of Congressman Ahl’s course in, “advocating and sustaining the National Administration in its public policy...”⁶⁰

Unfortunately for administration supporters, Lecomptonism was not unanimous even at the convention. An openly anti-Lecompton delegate with a free soil reputation, William Miller, sought election as delegate to the state convention, but was defeated by administration supporter Samuel Hepburn, 27 to 12.⁶¹ The *Volunteer* conceded “Notwithstanding there was considerable excitement during part of the proceedings, yet there was no angry feeling displayed...however much Democrats may disagree among themselves in regard to certain questions, they will not permit such disagreement to bolster up the pernicious doctrines of their

Republican opponents.”⁶² The *Carlisle Herald* told a more sinister story. A majority of the resolutions committee had been opposed to any mention of Ahl, but

after the Convention had adjourned, and part of the members had left the room, John Moore, of Dickinson, offered a resolution complimentary to Dr. Ahl. On this resolution the Chairman took a vote in the affirmative, and while those opposed to it were waiting for an opportunity to vote “nay” on the question, the Chairman “gagged” them, by declaring “the resolution carried and that the Convention was adjourned!”⁶³

Hostility toward Ahl was worsened by the Mechanicsburg Post Office affair. Postmaster William Eckels was removed by the Buchanan administration, possibly because he supported Democrat Judge Stuart for Congress in 1856 instead of Ahl.⁶⁴ Mechanicsburg Democrats held an “Indignation Meeting” that censured Congressman Ahl and appointed a committee of five to visit the Postmaster General in Washington. The committee first removed blame from Ahl, then attacked him in the pages of the *Mechanicsburg Gazette*. Ahl’s reply appeared in both the *Gazette* and the *Volunteer*. He denied promising the five to secure removal of the administration’s new postmaster, a Mr. Leas, and find a third man acceptable to the committee. As Ahl told it, “I did... say that I would do all in my power to gratify them and those whom they represented, provided I could do so without violating what I considered due in justice and honor to others.”⁶⁵ Ahl’s slippery pledge without a promise likely left bitter feelings among Mechanicsburg Democrats. Despite the county convention’s resolution approving his “course”, Ahl’s nomination to Congress was not renewed later that year. After nine Democratic conferees for Pennsylvania’s 16th Congressional District (Cumberland, Perry and York counties), including John Bratton, struggled through 222 ballots before settling on a York county man, they thought it important to publish a resolution asserting, “the protracted struggle for the nomination was not occasioned by any difference of opinion upon the Lecompton policy of the National Administration, which is endorsed by this conference.”⁶⁶

After the debates over Kansas and Lecompton, county Democrats continued to suffer from “little family quarrels”.⁶⁷ When Republicans captured some county offices in October 1859, the *Volunteer* complained, “Of course this was the work of professing Democrats, who, to gratify personal spleen, were induced to strike at and defeat several of the Democratic candidates.” Bratton vented spleen of his own nearly a year later at Democratic County Commissioner Samuel Megaw. The *Volunteer* blasted Megaw’s decision to run for re-election, allegedly the first time a commissioner had done so in the county. It pointed out the commissioner’s patronage power in appointing tax collectors and dispensing

contracts, which enabled Megaw to bully convention delegates into re-nominating him. Among Megaw's offenses while in office,

he has used his influence, personal and official, to injure us in our business. His menials and understrappers have discontinued their subscriptions to our paper, and have tried their best to influence others to do the same; no avowed friend of ours can be appointed a Tax Collector or receive a cent's worth of patronage from the Commissioners.⁶⁸

Woe to the Democrat who crossed John B. Bratton! Megaw received 300 fewer votes than all other Democratic candidates in October 1860, and was defeated by Republican George Miller by a margin of 700 votes.

Fractious as they were, Democrats continued the fight against Black Republicanism. More than ever they relied on racism to unify themselves and divide their opponents. Democracy was opposed to "Abolition, nigger worshipping [sic], nigger marrying, spiritual rapping and kindred isms...."⁶⁹ In case readers doubted that Republicans were for these "isms", the *Volunteer* referred them to comments of the Republican *Boston Atlas*, which deplored white prejudice against blacks and argued they deserved citizenship more than the Irish.⁷⁰ The Democratic party itself adopted racism at its August 1859 convention, which resolved

That the odious discrimination in favor of the negro, and against the naturalized citizen, as engrafted on the Constitution of Massachusetts by the united vote of the Know Nothings and Black Republicans, is a disgrace to the age, to liberty and sound government...

That this government was made for white men, and we deprecate any and all attempts of Know Nothing Black Republicans to administer its affairs so as to elevate the negro and degrade the white race; that while we accord to the former all privileges guaranteed by State and Federal Constitutions, we demand that all the rights granted to our native and adopted citizens shall be fully exercised by them, and that all discriminations, if any, should be in favor of the white man.⁷¹

The *Volunteer* asked, "can any [Republican] white man, who believes himself better than a negro, cast his vote, in future, with a party that maintains that a negro is as good as he? Are party ties so strong that they will bind him even to a greasy Ethiopian? Let the ballot box reply."⁷²

The finest occasion for defending white supremacy arose when Carl Schurz, a German immigrant and nationally prominent Republican speaker, came to Carlisle in September 1860. Schurz had argued in Massachusetts that Thomas Jefferson's phrase in the Declaration of Independence—that "all men are created equal"—included black men, whereas Stephen Douglas believed that it referred only to white men. The *Volunteer* did not bother proving what Jefferson meant, but attacked the implications of Schurz's thesis.

If the negro is created the equal of the white man, he ought to be treated as his equal—we ought to make him a companion, and take him to our tables and our bed; we ought to give him the right of suffrage, subject him to military duty, and make him eligible to any and all the offices in our republic. This is the necessary sequence of the Republican doctrine of negro equality...

Bratton's insight was praiseworthy, if not his response.

The Democratic party...hold that the negro is inferior to the white race;...that for some great and wise purpose, which it is not necessary now to investigate, the Creator never intended the negro to be made a companion and equal by white men. Hence we find in his creation, certain indelible marks of inferiority stamped upon his image. His black skin, woolly head, fat nose, long heels, and that strong and peculiar aroma so offensive to the nasal organ of white men, and his improvident nature and incapacity to provide a comfortable livelihood, all designate the negro as inferior in the grade of humanity to the white man.⁷³

For voters not sufficiently moved by the fear of taking black men into their beds, there was also the threat of disunion, particularly after John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, which the party condemned, along with its Black Republican "abettors".⁷⁴ Unfortunately, southern Democrats made it harder to blame Republicans alone for disunion. Refusing to support northern Democrats' favorite for president, Stephen Douglas, and demanding the party jettison popular sovereignty in favor of a federal code protecting slavery in the territories, the southerners broke up the national convention. They nominated their own candidate, John C. Breckenridge, while the northerners nominated Douglas.⁷⁵ In Pennsylvania the party tried to paper over the breach by setting up a Douglas-Breckenridge fusion ticket, but northern Democracy was nonetheless as sectional the Republicans.⁷⁶ For the first time since 1851, the *Volunteer* displayed anger at southern disunionists.⁷⁷ It lamented the party's division over a "miserable abstraction...the prohibition or non-prohibition of slavery in the Territories..."⁷⁸ Of course "prohibition or non-prohibition of freedom" would have been more accurate. But as the fall elections drew nearer, the paper targeted Republican "disunionism". In the event of Lincoln's election, dissolution of the Union would follow. "His election will not only be an intentional insult to the South but will be regarded as a declaration of war." The paper accused Republicans of training and arming their activists—"Wide Awakes"—to "humble the South and root out slavery" once Lincoln was elected. "Are we to submit to a military despotism?"⁷⁹

The answer was yes. During the secession crisis, Bratton appointed himself the South's spokesman, blaming the North for everything it had ever done to injure or criticize slavery.⁸⁰ His willingness of 1851 to suppress South Carolina

was re-stated, but not enthusiastically.⁸¹ When the Confederacy fired on Fort Sumter, he blamed the war on Lincoln and Republican legislators.⁸² Bratton changed his tune only when he realized its unpopularity.⁸³ His view of the war was not shared even by the *Democrat*.⁸⁴

In truth, Democrats were in a bind. They had wished to protect the Union from free soil agitation and Republican victory. Saving the Union now required upholding the Republican government, not saying, "I told you so." But the *Volunteer's* anti-war column of April 18, 1861, foreshadowed Democrats' desire to save the Union as it was before secession rather than as remade by emancipation and racial equality.⁸⁵ That conservatism would restore and strengthen its hold on the loyalty of most Cumberland County voters during and after the war.

Notes

1. "Democratic County Convention," *American Volunteer*, February 28, 1850; "The Compromise," *ibid.*, August 8, 1850.
2. "What We Battle For," *ibid.*, August 5, 1847.
3. *Ibid.*, April 17, 1851; "Congressional Conference," *ibid.*, September 7, 1854; "The Long Contest Ended," *ibid.*, September 30, 1858.
4. *Ibid.*, January 8, 1852.
5. David G. Colwell, *The Bitter Fruits* (Carlisle, PA, 1998), 14, 28.
6. "New York Politics," *American Volunteer*, December 30, 1847.
7. David Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, (New York, NY, 1976), 59.
8. "Instructions on the Slave Question," *American Volunteer*, January 31, 1850.
9. "Democratic County Convention," *ibid.*, February 28, 1850.
10. *Ibid.*, November 5, 1846.
11. "Questions Decided," *Carlisle Herald*, October 27, 1847.
12. "Taylor and Cass on Slavery," *ibid.*, August 23, 1848; "Who Are the Agitators," *American Democrat*, August 14, 1851; "Is the Democratic Party Pro-Slavery?" *Ibid.*, September 25, 1856.
13. Potter, *loc. cit.*, 59.
14. U.S. Const. Art. III, Sec. 3, Para. 2.
15. James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York, NY, 1988), 175-76.
16. Potter, *loc. cit.*, 60.
17. U.S. Const., Art. IV, Sec. 3, Para. 3.
18. Potter, *loc. cit.*, 131.
19. "Fugitive Slave Case," *Carlisle Herald*, November 20, 1850.
20. "Disappearance of Our Colored Population," *American Volunteer*, November 14, 1850.
21. "Our Colored Population," *ibid.*, January 22, 1852.
22. "The 'Pennsylvanian' and The Late Murder at Columbia," *ibid.*, May 20, 1852.
23. *Ibid.*, June 17, 1847; "The Kidnapping Law of 1847," *ibid.*, April 3, 1851; "Bigler and Johnston—Union and Disunion," *American Democrat*, July 10, 1851.
24. "Speech of Mr. Bonham," *American Volunteer*, May 8, 1851.
25. Henry R. Mueller, *The Whig Party in Pennsylvania* (New York, NY, 1922) 186-87, 193.

26. "Speech of Mr. Bonham," *American Volunteer*, April 8, 1852.
27. *Ibid.*, May 14, 1854.
28. "J. Ellis Bonham," *ibid.*, March 22, 1855.
29. James M. McPherson, loc. cit., 73; "Higher Law' Federalism," *American Democrat*, April 10, 1851.
30. "Agitation North and South," *ibid.*, May 15, 1851.
31. "A Rank Abolitionist," *ibid.*, July 3, 1851; "Bigler and Johnston—Union and Disunion," *ibid.*, July 10, 1851; "The Fruits of Gov. Johnston's Abolitionism," *ibid.*, September 12, 1851; "Anti-Nebraska," *ibid.*, February 15, 1856.
32. "Dr. Nevin, the Abolitionist," *ibid.*, September 18, 1856. See also "Mean Way to Obtain Votes," *American Volunteer*, October 9, 1856.
33. "Democratic County Convention," *ibid.*, February 28, 1850; "Democratic Republican County Meeting," *ibid.*, August 25, 1853.
34. "Instructions on the Slave Question," *ibid.*, January 31, 1850; "Agitation North and South," *American Democrat*, May 15, 1851.
35. "The Union—It Must Be Preserved," *American Volunteer*, December 13, 1849.
36. "The South Carolina Treason," *ibid.*, May 22, 1851. The paper later contradicted itself in support of Bonham's second speech. "It must be evident to every one that the North was more favored than the South.." See "Mr. Bonham's Speech," *ibid.*, April 8, 1852.
37. "New Territories," *ibid.*, February 2, 1854.
38. "Nebraska Territory," *ibid.*, February 23, 1854.
39. "Clerical Presumption," *ibid.*, March 30, 1854; "Democratic Republican County Meeting," *ibid.*, August 31, 1854.
40. "Democratic County Convention," *ibid.*, August 23, 1855.
41. John F. Coleman, *The Disruption of the Democracy, 1848 – 1860* (Harrisburg, PA, 1975), 70.
42. "Emigrations to the New Territories," *American Volunteer*, June 22, 1854.
43. "The Missouri Compromise and the Free States," *ibid.*, October 9, 1856. See also "Nebraska," *ibid.*, May 25, 1854.
44. "Emigrations to the New Territories," *ibid.*, June 22, 1854.
45. "The Presidential Elections," *ibid.*, August 28, 1856.
46. "Democratic County Convention," *ibid.*, August 14, 1856; "Can Tariff Men Support Wilmot?" *ibid.*, July 30, 1857; "Can Oil and Water Mingle," *ibid.*, September 10, 1857.
47. "The Troubles of the American," *ibid.*, August 20, 1857; "What Has Become of the Know Nothing Party!" *ibid.*, September 18, 1856.
48. "Black vs. White Men," *ibid.*, July 26, 1855.
49. *Ibid.*, November 15, 1855.
50. "Negro Suffrage," *ibid.*, October 9, 1856.
51. "Anti-Nebraska," *American Democrat*, February 15, 1856; "Black Republicanism Rampant," *ibid.*, June 11, 1857.
52. "A Colored Duel," *American Volunteer*, February 21, 1856.
53. "Negro Suffrage," *ibid.*, October 9, 1856.
54. Potter, loc. cit., 311.
55. McPherson, loc. cit., 168-69.
56. "Hon. John A. Ahl," *American Volunteer*, February 18, 1858.
57. "The Kansas Constitution," *ibid.*, December 10, 1857.

58. "Let Kansas Be Admitted," *ibid.*, January 14, 1858; "Let Kansas Come In," *ibid.*, February 25, 1858.
59. "Gov. Bigler and the 'Little Giant,'" *American Democrat*, December 17, 1857; "The President's Special Message," *ibid.*, February 11, 1858.
60. "Democratic County Convention," *American Volunteer*, March 4, 1858.
61. "Ratification Meeting," *Carlisle American*, June 11, 1856; "The Democratic County Convention," *Carlisle Herald*, March 3, 1858.
62. "The County Convention," *American Volunteer*, March 4, 1858.
63. "The Democratic County Convention," *Carlisle Herald*, March 3, 1858.
64. "Our Next Congressman," *ibid.*, July 21, 1858.
65. "Hon. John A. Ahl—The Mechanicsburg Post Office," *American Volunteer*, February 25, 1858.
66. "Conferee Meeting," *ibid.*, September 30, 1858.
67. "Let Us Reason Together," *ibid.*, March 31, 1859.
68. "County Commissioner Megaw," *ibid.*, August 23, 1860.
69. "The Future of the Democratic Party," *ibid.*, February 17, 1859, quoted in Colwell, *loc. cit.*, 128.
70. "Negro Equality," *ibid.*, September 13, 1859.
71. "Democratic County Convention," *ibid.*, August 11, 1859.
72. "Negro Equality," *ibid.*, September 13, 1859.
73. "The Issue Fairly Stated," *ibid.*, October 4, 1860.
74. "Democratic County Convention," *ibid.*, January 12, 1860.
75. Potter, *loc. cit.*, 409-13.
76. Coleman, *loc. cit.*, 128.
77. "Yancey the Disunionist," *American Volunteer*, May 17, 1860; "An Address to the Seceders," *ibid.*, May 24, 1860.
78. "The War of Abstractions," *ibid.*, August 9, 1860.
79. "The Great Issue To Be Decided November Next," *ibid.*, October 18, 1860.
80. "Who Are the Disunionists?" *ibid.*, November 22, 1860; "Who Are Responsible?" *ibid.*, January 24, 1861; "The National Crisis," *ibid.*, February 7, 1861. See Colwell, *loc. cit.*, 35.
81. "Secession of South Carolina," *ibid.*, January 3, 1861.
82. "Old Abe's War," *ibid.*, April 18, 1861.
83. Colwell, *loc. cit.*, 38-39.
84. Colwell, *loc. cit.*, 37.
85. McPherson, *loc. cit.*, 506, 685-86.