Free Soil: The Birth of the Republican Party in Cumberland County

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There was a time when Cumberland County had no Republican party. It was born of the 1850s struggle between slavery and free labor that produced the Civil War. The party itself helped bring about war, for it was exclusively northern and “free soil”, determined to stop slavery’s spread. Merely by winning the presidency and Congress in 1860, the Republicans provoked seven southern states to secede, with four to follow upon the war’s outbreak. Though a new party, the Republicans arose from existing politicians and ideas, especially those of the northern Whig party that had withered only a short time before. In Cumberland County, Republicans continued Whig loyalty to free soil and high tariffs and drew their strength from the same precincts that had supported the Whigs. Republicanism here was the child of Whiggery.

Whigs and Democrats before the Storm

Up to 1847, Whigs and Democrats, north and south, argued mainly about government’s role in the economy. Pennsylvania’s Whig party had appeared during the 1830s in a mood of rage over Democratic President Andrew Jackson’s efforts to kill the Second Bank of the United States.¹ Whigs (denounced as “Federalists” by Democrats) supported government banks and government funding of “internal improvements”—canals, roads, bridges—while Democrats (denounced as “loco foci” by Whigs) opposed them. As county Democrats put it at their August, 1846 convention, they opposed “all measures of a consolidating, centralizing and federal tendency, whereby the rights of the states and of the people may be trampled under foot by a colossal central power.”² Although Democrats tended to have stronger support in Cumberland County, the Whigs had a powerful issue: tariffs. Whigs believed that tariffs—taxes on imported foreign goods—ought to be kept high enough to protect and encourage American industry and appealed to the self-interest of American workers anxious about their jobs. In 1842 Congress had set duties at a satisfactorily
high level but in 1846 the Democratic Congress and president had cut duties. Whigs claimed as “Blessings of the New Tariff” that “Factories are stopping in various places,” and “The English nabobs are preparing to ship large invoices of goods to factories in America.” Cumberland County Democrats were in a tight spot. At their August 1846 convention they disapproved the new tariff as producing insufficient revenue and as possibly “injurious to the great iron and coal interests of Pennsylvania.” Whigs kept up attacks along this line for years. In 1849 the *Shippensburg News* wrote, “Foreign manufacturers monopolize our market, and drive everything American out of it...thus closing many of our workshops, and depriving hundreds and thousands of poor men of the means of supporting their families.” The paper loudly called for

**Protection!** The People, who were so basely and cruelly deceived and swindled in 1844, are trumpet-tongued demanding it! We say a place on our own soil for our own enterprize [sic], our own labor, our own manufacturers and our own agriculturalists! To effect this, the British Tariff of '46 must be repealed, and the Protective features of that of '42 restored!

Unfortunately for Whigs, the tariff issue lost its power when Cumberland County’s economy refused to collapse. County Democrats felt safe enough by 1849 to shift position and defend the 1846 tariff. At a county meeting in August they openly opposed “a high protective tariff.” A convention held February 26, 1850 resolved that, “the present tariff has operated well for the interests of the working classes, and should not be disturbed for light and trivial causes.” Later that year the Democratic *American Volunteer* even dared to publish a defense of free trade. Another paper wrote, “The federal government was not made to help a man to his food and clothing, to enable him to raise or spin cotton, to manufacture iron or grow sugar cane.” The Democrats had lost their terror of the tariff.

Political economy was not the only divide between Whig and Democrat. When the United States invaded Mexico during 1846 and 1847, many Whigs opposed the war as a wicked land-grab from a weak neighbor. Cumberland County Whigs prefaced a proclamation of Whig patriotism with the sad statement, “while we decidedly believe that the war with Mexico could and ought to have been avoided and while we lament that unhappy contest which places our country in the unnatural attitude of an invader of a neighboring republic...” Democrats had no such qualms. They called the war, “just and righteous in its inception,” and, “one into which we have been forced by the many and aggravated outrages upon our citizens by that semi-barbarous people....” But Whigs across the United States were able to duck the label of “Federal Mexican party” in 1848 by nominating for president Zachary Taylor, one of the two generals
who defeated Mexico. It was not their opposition to war that destroyed the Whig party, it was the strife between North and South that the war created.

The Political Landscape of Cumberland County

Politics in mid-nineteenth century Pennsylvania were not as broadly based as our own. Under the state constitution of 1838, neither women nor non-white men were allowed to vote or run for office. Candidates were nominated not by primary elections but by party conventions. County conventions, usually held twice a year, drew their delegates from precinct meetings and sent one or more delegates to state conventions. Each August county convention elected standing committees supposed to manage the party’s affairs during the next year and call future conventions. Although precinct meetings were the common voters’ only chance to influence party nominations and policy, few attended them. “It is often the case that these delegate meetings are neglected, and the business left to the management of a few, who, having some personal interest at stake, are induced to attend.” Even committee members suffered from apathy. “Standing committees appointed from year to year, forget in a few weeks that they are on the committee at all, and are only reminded of it when they are called together to appoint a time for delegate elections and the meeting of the convention.”

At every convention there were new faces, many not to appear again by 1860. In the August 1852 Whig convention there were 13 new delegates among 44 and eight new members in a standing committee of 21, “new” in the sense that they had not appeared in any convention since 1845 or run for county, Carlisle or Shippensburg offices. Turnover was at least as high in 1860. At the February 1860 Republican county convention there were nine new delegates out of 35. In August there were fifteen new delegates out of 43 and seventeen new members were elected to the standing committee out of 37 (with eight members obscured in the record published by the Carlisle Herald). At the 1860 Democratic conventions there were sixteen out of 42 new delegates in January and ten out of 46 in August. The standing committee of 48 elected in August was evenly divided between those who were new and those who were not. Just as significant at the 1860 conventions were those delegates who were not “new”
but had been active in some way only since 1856. Among Republicans there were eleven of these recent veterans in February and thirteen in August. Three similar politicians were elected to the standing committee. In other words, those who had served the Whig party before 1855 were outnumbered on the floor and in committee by those who joined the Republican movement after 1855. The Democratic conventions also featured majorities of post-1855 delegates.

Amidst the apathetic and the occasional, there were men who could be counted on to attend convention after convention, and run for office. Vigorous Democrats included, for example, Philip Quigley of Carlisle’s East Ward (six conventions, 1851-59, elected county auditor in 1849 and prothonotary in 1857), John B. Perry of Mifflin township (five conventions, 1848-60), and John Moore of Dickinson township (nine conventions, 1846-1860). Many Whigs remained active in the new Republican party after 1856, including Richard Anderson of Monroe township (five conventions, 1850-59), William Baughman of Shippensburg township (seven conventions, 1847-60) and Owen James of New Cumberland (eight conventions, 1847-60).  

Newspapers openly aligned themselves with one party or the other. In Cumberland County the Whigs commanded the loyalty of the Carlisle Herald and Shippensburg News and the Democrats that of Carlisle’s American Volunteer and American Democrat. The financial records of these papers are not available today but party papers rarely supported themselves. They often depended on party subsidies, public printing contracts or other political patronage jobs for their editors. Even in those days the local press also had to compete with papers outside the county.

The Whigs were a minority in Cumberland County, but one Democrats could not take lightly. Cumberland was one of a half dozen swing counties in Pennsylvania’s presidential elections between 1836 and 1852. In 1840 the Whigs won their first victory when presidential candidate William Henry Harrison beat Democratic incumbent Martin Van Buren. A temporary split among county Democrats during 1842 allowed the Whigs to sweep the county offices and both state house seats. In 1844 they took only one office (a state house seat) but nearly every candidate came within 100 votes—less than 1% of 6000 cast—of victory. In the eleven county-wide elections held between 1845 and 1853, when turnout was as low as 3902 in 1846 and as high as 6127 in 1851, the Whigs always drew at least 46% of the vote and thrice out-poll the Democrats (1846, November 1848 and 1851). The greater the turnout, the higher the percentage of votes the Whigs tended to receive, though their best year was 1846, when turnout was at its lowest.
Different parts of the county voted differently. Democrats tended to win a majority in the western and central electoral districts (townships and boroughs), though the Whigs consistently won Shippensburg, West Pennsboro township and the West District of Carlisle. Except for Silver Spring township, Whigs could count on winning the eastern third of the county—Monroe, Allen, Hampden and East Pennsboro townships, and Mechanicsburg. Electoral districts had stable loyalties. Out of eighteen districts, eight voted for the same party at every election from 1845 to 1852, and eight others voted for the same party in nine of the ten elections. Only three districts—Hopewell, Southampton and South Middleton townships—voted twice against the normally prevailing party.24

The Storm gathers

Slavery was the American republic’s chronic disease but symptoms of sectional strife appeared only when conditions were right. In 1787, the constitutional convention almost broke down over whether slaves should count for either representation or taxation. The matter was settled by making each slave count as three-fifths of a person for both representation and taxation.25 The Constitution also protected the slave trade until 1808 and required each state to turn over fugitive slaves (and indentured servants) to the state from which they had fled.26 This fugitive slave clause benefited Pennsylvania, where slavery was still legal. Slavery’s growth in the territories was settled for a generation, with slavery banned in the Northwest Territory (Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin) and allowed in the Southwest (Mississippi and Alabama).27

It was the territorial issue that endangered American unity again and again. As the United States grew, new states entered the Union either free or slaveholding, and threatened to tilt the federal government toward one section or the other. Each dispute was a struggle for power between two societies that became ever more polarized toward free and slave labor. Conflict erupted when Missouri—the second of many states to be formed from the 1803 Louisiana Purchase—applied for statehood as a slave state in 1820. The North, where slavery was now abolished, and the South compromised by admitting Missouri and forbidding slavery in the rest of the territory above the line of Missouri’s southern border, the 36°30” parallel. After Texas won independence from Mexico in 1836, its annexation was blocked by northern congressmen because slavery was legal there.28 Northerners eventually allowed Texas’ admission in 1845 on the mistaken understanding that the Polk administration would also acquire more free territory, specifically the Canadian half of the Oregon territory.29 Now the war with Mexico created a new chance for external growth and internal strife.
That strife was set off by Pennsylvania Congressman David Wilmot, who proposed on August 8, 1846 that slavery be excluded from any new territories detached from Mexico.30 This “Wilmot Proviso” was warmly greeted by northern Whigs, who resented southern support for free trade.31 When the proviso went down to defeat in 1847, the Herald blamed northern pro-South Democrats—“doughfaces”—for opposing it.

Had the Wilmot proviso passed, all the dangers which are likely to follow the Mexican war would have been averted. Slavery would have been told in stern tones, ‘thus far shalt thou go and no farther, and here shall thy proud march be stayed.’ As it is a crisis may come which shall shake the very foundations of the Union.

The Herald was careful to distinguish between its opposition to slavery’s growth—preserving “free soil”—and abolishing it where it existed.32 Responding to an attack by the Volunteer, it protested, “the Wilmot proviso has not slightest connexion with what is called Abolitionism. The Wilmot proviso is the simple position that FREE SOIL SHALL REMAIN FREE and that the Slave territory of the United States shall be extended no further.”33 In 1848 the Herald portrayed slave-holding presidential candidate Zachary Taylor as a friend of free soil.34 After Taylor was elected, the Shippensburg News not only argued free soil as an exclusively Whig principle but also claimed (wrongly) that Taylor’s willingness to support free soil was shared by Southern Whigs generally. “Thus it will be seen that the only hope for FREEDOM is in the Whig party.”35

Cumberland County Whigs agreed with their newspapers. On August 27, 1849 a county meeting resolved, “That we continue as ever the firm and unyielding opponents of the extension of human slavery…”.36

But local Whigs abandoned free soil as the sectional crisis came to a peak in 1850, when California sought admission to the Union as a free state. Kentucky Whig Senator Henry Clay tried to settle matters by introducing a number of measures later known as the Compromise of 1850. These measures—admitting California, organizing New Mexico and Utah as territories open to slavery, abolishing the slave trade in Washington, D.C., and tightening enforcement of the Constitution’s fugitive slave clause—passed after several months of debate and maneuvering. Dropping free soil, the News backed the compromise. “What the Nation requires is a final and satisfactory adjustment of this question….”37 The Herald showed no such support, and the party merely praised Clay and the “spirit of Compromise” without endorsing his specific proposal.38 As debate dragged on, the Herald complained about Clay’s opposition to a more attractive plan by President Taylor, and his refusal to take up tariffs in Congress until the compromise had been settled.
Mr. Clay, knowing the power and influence which [Southern pro-slavery politicians] have been allowed to gain, has no rebuke for them, but turns to the North and says, ‘you must yield!’ You may be suffering from the deluge of British importations, your Iron Works and Manufactories may be sinking into bankruptcy and ruin—your free laborers may be suffering from want of employment—but we can’t do anything for you. We are all so absorbed with this slavery agitation here in Washington, that we have not even time to think of you.”

Once the compromise measures became law, Whigs grudgingly accepted them. The Herald urged free soil men to leave Congress alone, so long as inaction served their purposes. “He is not the most effective champion of Free Soil in Congress who makes the most ado about it.” Even the highly unpopular fugitive slave law, which extended federal police power on behalf of slavery, should be tolerated, at least for the moment. The News criticized those in and out of Pennsylvania calling for open resistance to slave-catching and urged them to work for repeal instead. Two years later, the News went much further, attacking Democratic presidential candidate Franklin Pierce for publicly “loathing” the fugitive slave law, “the measure that is now looked upon as the only means which subdued and silenced the agitation that came so near proving the ruin of our glorious country.” The paper did not foresee that Pierce would enforce the law vigorously as president.

Local Whigs’ support for the Compromise, however grudging, may have shielded Cumberland County’s party from voter backlash against the 1851 Christiana fugitive slave riot in Lancaster County, where a slaveholder was killed and a federal marshal wounded. Because Whig Governor Johnston had publicly attacked the fugitive slave law and refused to sign a bill repealing Pennsylvania’s personal liberty law of 1847, Democrats were able to paint him as an abolitionist and link him to the riot. Johnston was turned out of office, but Cumberland County Whigs enjoyed one of their best elections ever, winning an overall majority of votes and eight out of twelve county offices. Voters here probably had little interest in the Christiana events because Carlisle had already hosted the “McClintock” fugitive slave riot in 1847.

Despite their exceptional victory, Cumberland County Whigs could not escape the downward spiral that now afflicted the national Whig party. In 1852 the Whigs repeated their strategy of nominating for president a victorious general: Winfield Scott, the conqueror of Mexico City. Southern Whigs, who felt betrayed by Zachary Taylor’s willingness to support free soil in the former Mexican territories, refused to support Scott because he had ties to Taylor’s political mentor, New York Whig and free soil man William Seward. Scott also failed
to endorse the Compromise of 1850. Northern voters were unwilling to endanger the Compromise, so Scott was defeated in most northern states. In Cumberland County, Scott polled only 47.4% of the vote, compared to a mean 48.9% for local Whig candidates in the previous month’s election. The Whigs had survived defeat before, but malaise now drained their vitality. Even before the disastrous 1853 election, when Cumberland County Whigs turned in their worst showing since 1841, they asked whether there was still a Whig party.

There was, but not for long.

The Storm Erupts

Two events in 1854 ensured the Whig party’s doom. The first was the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill through Congress. Up to now, the Nebraska territory—a part of the old Louisiana purchase extending from modern Kansas to Montana—remained unorganized. Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, a Democrat who had helped the 1850 Compromise measures become law, wished to see a transcontinental railroad extend westward through his state. He proposed separating Kansas from Nebraska and organizing the former in preparation for statehood. Unfortunately, Douglas needed the support of southern senators, who demanded repeal of the Missouri Compromise as their price. And so it was done. For the first time, the slavery debate turned not on new acquisitions but on territory where the question was settled. The southerners may have wanted repeal because Cuba or other possible new territories for slavery appeared beyond their grasp, but their price was higher than the Union could afford.

“Pass this bill;” warned the Shippensburg News, “destroy all previous legislation on this subject, and the Union, which the slavery propagandists have been upholding for years, will soon become one scene of confusion and strife.” When the bill passed, the Herald voiced cold fury:

We cannot speak patiently and temperately on this subject. It is the most momentous vote in its ulterior consequences ever passed by Congress. It is the first stroke at the stability of our Union that is real...

No Compromise will ever be made again, while this Government holds together. No mode of enactment can be framed that will be felt as binding. The South wilfully [sic] and wantonly violated the Compact of 1820, will be the cry, and they cannot be trusted again....

The feeling of brotherhood, nursed amid the storms of revolution and nourished by the blood of the patriots, will wither in the hearts of the North until it dies away even from their memories. We threaten nothing; but the South may depend on it that the confidence in their honor has been woefully shaken by this repeal of a solemn compact.
Northern and southern Whigs parted company for good. Anger at the Nebraska bill might have revived northern Whiggery as a free soil party, just as the Democrats were to become “southernized” after 1854, but it did not. Across the North “anti-Nebraska” and “Republican” parties sprouted up that included both Whigs and Democrats disgusted by repeal of the Missouri Compromise. Pennsylvania’s turn came in mid-August, 1855 when the following notice appeared:

The citizens of Pennsylvania, without regard to former party distinction, who are willing to unite in a new organization to resist the further spread of slavery and the increase of the slave power, are requested to meet in Mass Convention at Pittsburg [sic] to organize a Republican party in this State, which shall give expression to the popular will on the subjects involved in the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and cooperate with other organizations of a similar character in other states.

But no Republicans appeared in Cumberland County that year. Whigs here were deeply involved in a very different organization.

The second event in 1854 was the sudden and unforeseen rise of the Know Nothings. This new movement, secretive and bent on reducing immigration, especially Irish Catholic immigration, replaced the Whig party as the Democracy’s chief opponent. After March 1855, it produced the Carlisle American, a new paper edited by former Whig Prothonotary George Zinn. Not all Know Nothings were Whigs. The former included some native-born Protestant Democrats, like Carlisle’s Lemuel Todd. Running for Congress in 1854 as an “independent”, Todd defeated the regular Democratic candidate, J. Ellis Bonham. Three Democrats winning county offices that year also turned out to be Know Nothing infiltrators. Some “old-line” Whigs remained outside the Know Nothing “American” party. They showed their power the next year when county Know Nothings refused to ally with them for county elections. Forced to run a separate slate, the Whigs drew eight percent of the vote, enough to bring down all but one of the Know Nothing candidates. That one—a candidate for sheriff—was supported by the Whigs.

The Know Nothings might have survived this embarrassing defeat but they could not survive slavery any better than the Whigs. Even as Lemuel Todd announced his candidacy in 1854, he declared his opposition to “that policy...that would darken our National escutcheon by permitting and aiding in the extension of slavery over territory now free....” Know Nothings abandoned secrecy in 1856 and joined with the Whig remnant to form a “Union” party. Although they tried to preserve their identity into 1857, the Know Nothings’ absorption into free soil Republicanism was assured by the violent struggle that developed in Kansas.
When elections were held for Kansas' new territorial legislature in 1855, thousands of Missouri residents crossed the border to cast their ballots and impose upon the territory a ferociously pro-slavery legislature that met at Lecompton. This fraud was bitterly noted by the Herald, under the heading of "The Kansas Outrage," as was the new legislature's act making it a felony to contradict anyone's right to hold slaves in Kansas. Even the American Democrat, normally no friend of free soil, protested, "The territory should be kept open for all emigrants, and there should be an entire protection for person and property. The government of the country is bound to secure this, and will no doubt perform its duty." Northern settlers entering Kansas were not willing to be disenfranchised and set up their own legislature at Topeka. The fighting that broke out between the factions took on a symbolic meaning for both North and South.

In themselves, the conflicts of Kansas are nothing but petty squabbles of border ruffians and law-loving immigrants. But looked at in their first view, they are to us the most important events of the century. The Nation feels it; and the doings of a General of Militia and a cast-off politician in that obscure wilderness, are watched with a breathless interest, such as the campaigns on the Danube or the Black Sea have never aroused. We feel as we hear the first whistling rifle shot on those distant prairies between men of a Free State and men of a Slave State, that it is the first ominous collision between the two great conflicting principles of our history—Freedom and Slavery.

The Shippensburg News would prove correct, even though the paper later criticized the free state settlers for failing to live up to its early vision of valiant freedom fighters. Despite the "Kansas Outrage," 1856 was a disappointing year for the Union party. In October its slate won only 48 percent of the vote—down from a combined 53 percent for Whigs and Know Nothings the previous year—and lost all twelve state and county offices. In November, the Republican and Know Nothing presidential candidates—John C. Fremont and Millard Fillmore—received fewer votes combined than Pennsylvania Democrat James Buchanan. Buchanan won a plurality in every precinct but New Cumberland (won by Fillmore) and Plainfield (won by Fremont). Cumberland County was not ready for Republicanism; whereas Fremont outpolled Fillmore across the state by 32 to eighteen percent, Fillmore beat Fremont in the county by a 100 votes.

County Know Nothings and Whigs remained together in their Union party. When the state Whig leadership and most of the Know Nothing leadership merged with the Republicans in 1858 under the name of the "People's Party," the county's Union party became Republican by default. As Whigs, Cumberland
County politicians and editors had largely been content to oppose the extension of slavery without elaborating their reasons, but as part of the emerging Republican party, they justified their views in detail.

The Republican critique used two related arguments. Slavery in the territories would be bad for non-slaveholding whites wanting to go there.

The great object in opposing the extension of Slavery to new territory is to keep free white workingmen from being forced into degrading competition with Slaves. It is not sympathy for negroes but for white men. Every laboring man who ever hopes to be able to settle on a farm of his own in the rich soil of the far south-west should therefore aim to make Kansas and the other territories free.

For example, according to the Herald, a free carpenter was refused work in Kentucky because the prospective employer had already bought two carpenters as slaves.66

Slavery was also bad for white society in general. “Give them KANSAS and you shut out enterprise, industry and capital, intelligence, humanity and liberty, and the dark demon will spread over the land like the breath of a desolating pestilence.”67 The Herald compared the consequences of free and slave labor. Where the North’s wildresses had blossomed with populous cities, wealth and trade, the South’s luxuriant plains had become waste places and her wealth squandered. “The rickety buildings, and dilapidated villages proclaim it, trumpeter-tongued, FREE LABOR has made the North what she this day is. SLAVE LABOR has been the cause of the South’s degeneracy! Would it not have the same effect on Kansas, the garden spot of our country?”68

In a slave society, non-slaveholding whites were demeaned below the level of the slave.69 The non-slaveholder had “no rights that are respected, either by the master or the slave. His children are denied the advantages of common schools, and every means which a tyrannical oligarchy can command, are adopted for the purpose of keeping the non-slaveholding portion of the population in disgraceful ignorance and squalid poverty.”70 But readers needed take not the News’ word for it. It had already published the following extract from the Muscogee Herald in Alabama:

Free Society! We sicken of the name. What is it but a conglomeration of GREASY MECHANICS, FILTHY OPERATIVES, SMALL FISTED FARMERS and moon struck THEORISTS? All the Northern and especially the New England States are devoid of society fitted for well-bred gentlemen. The prevailing class one meets with is that of mechanics struggling to be genteel, and small farmers who do their own drudgery; and yet who are hardly fit for association with a Southern gentleman’s body servant.71
Appealing to northern pride, the *News* asked in one title, “Shall the South Rule You?”

Unfortunately, Republican editors had to spend much print space refuting Democratic accusations that the party promoted racial equality and abolition. We have already seen the *Herald* deny sympathy for blacks as a reason for supporting free soil in 1856. The *News* and *Carlisle American* went further to get on the “right” side of racism. The *News* pointed out that a constitution proposed by Kansas free state settlers excluded free blacks. It also embroidered on the United States Constitution’s three-fifths clause to claim absurdly that southern Congressmen owed their seats to black votes but Republicans did not. Disunion was threatened by the South, said the *News*, “because the North refuses to surrender up to the negro the free heritage of our children…” The *American* claimed that Democratic willingness to let slaves into the territories was evidence that “their devotion and adoration of the negro is so strong and marked that they fear that their opponents might perceive it.” Four years later the *News* was pleased to print an extract from one of Lincoln’s 1858 speeches rejecting social and political equality for black Americans. The paper concluded, “How dare any lying Locofoco print charge [sic] Mr. Lincoln with being in favor of negro equality, in the face of the above extract from one of his published speeches?”

How sincere was Republican racism? Bigotry appeared in non-political contexts. The *News* complained about misbehavior by a “party of lazy, drunken niggers.” In 1859 the *American* ran a humorous anecdote titled, “A ‘Nigger Story,’” in which two “darkies” bought a mess of pork in common and one stole it from the other. The *American* may have planted this item with the party’s political image in mind, but contempt for blacks showed up in the *News* half a year before the Kansas-Nebraska bill. When black Shippensburgers held an African Quarterly Meeting in their church on “Ethiopian Heights”, the meeting “was characterized by no signal good but a tremendous outpouring of the sable brethren.” The *News* remarked sarcastically that, “More of the spirit of wine was felt than the spirit of Christianity.” But there was some truth to Democratic charges. Local Republicans were tied by party to genuine advocates of racial equality like Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, Salmon Chase of Ohio, and Joshua Giddings and Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. Unlike local Democrats, the Republicans never adopted racism as party doctrine.

Republicans were just as anxious to avoid association with abolition, especially after John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, in October 1859. A county convention held February 7, 1860, asserted the federal government had no power to interfere with slavery in states, and repudiated, “all sympathy and co operation [sic] with those men in the North, who, in their fanatical hostility to Slavery, renounce their obligations to the Constitution and Laws—teach
insurrection and treason....”81 The Republican press went so far as to portray
a fictitious “Abolition” party as distinct from the Republicans, who occupied, “a
conservative position, checking the ravings of disunion abolitionists at the north,
and the fire-eaters and secessionists of the south.”82 The Herald argued that
slaves in Maryland and Virginia were in better condition than two-thirds of
Carlisle’s black residents. “A negro in Pennsylvania, has no right save that of
protection. In the government he is the merest cipher; in social life, he is only
recognized in the capacity of a menial, and the man who would incite a slave to
leave his master, by holding up before him the glittering bauble of liberty, shorn
of its attendant blessings, is an enemy to both.”83 The paper later praised a
slave who refused abolitionist promptings to abandon his master while in New
York and remarked that “whenever the secret designs of the Abolitionists are
unmasked, they will be found to contemplate, treason to the Government, and
infidelity to religion.”84 Again, Republican denials were not entirely true. Radicals
in the national party wanted to attack slavery in the South by constitution-
ally permissible means, such as using federal patronage to build up abolitionist
Republican parties, repealing the fugitive slave law and banning slavery in the
District of Columbia.85 They befriended and exchanged views with abolition-
ists to gain their support.86 Even moderate free soil men like Lincoln hoped for
the “ultimate extinction” of slavery once its extension had been stopped.87

Local Republicans opposed slavery’s extension, but what were they for, if not
for abolition? They needed an answer after 1857, when the Democrat-turned-
Republican David Wilmot lost the gubernatorial race and Cumberland County’s
party polled a mere 45.6% percent of the vote and lost all offices.88 This election
showed the limits of free soil’s appeal and the need to attract old-line Whigs.
The latter found Wilmot, a free trader and former Democrat, unappealing.
Wilmot’s one-issue focus also made him vulnerable to Democratic attack. Said
the Volunteer, “Let Mr. Wilmot define his position in regard to State affairs. He
is running for office in Pennsylvania, and not in Kansas, as his speeches would
seem to imply.”89 Republicans answered with... the tariff! The Herald put
tariffs before free soil when it joined the call for reconstituting the old Whig
party.90 Republican county conventions repeatedly called for tariff increases
sufficient to protect American industry.91 The News also sang the old Whig
song, “Our national treasury is bankrupt and our government running into
debt at a fearful pace; our revenues are inadequate to meet the unprecedented
expenditures of government; our iron furnaces, our rolling mills, and our Cotton
and Woolen factories are silent....”92 In August 1860, county convention
delegates went so far to stress tariffs at the expense of free soil that they avoided
mentioning the latter except by “cordially” approving the national Republican
platform.93
The tariff issue certainly did county Republicans no harm, but they were also helped by national events. In Washington, the Buchanan administration sent to Congress a constitution for Kansas drafted at a convention called by the pro-slavery legislature at Lecompton. If Congress approved it, the constitution would be submitted to a referendum. To the rage of Republicans and dismay of many northern Democrats, Kansas voters could not reject the entire constitution but only a provision legalizing slavery.94 Even the constitution “without slavery” protected ownership of the two hundred slaves already in the territory. Senator Douglas, author of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, led the fight against Lecompton, which was defeated in the House of Representatives. Kansas would not become a state until 1861.95 Angered by their failure to make Kansas a slave state, southern politicians demanded a federal code to protect slavery in all the territories, a Wilmot Proviso in reverse.96 Just as Republicans wanted to contain slavery, southerners now wished to contain free labor. A slave code could not get through Congress, but it could divide the Democratic party, which it did in 1860. Northern Democrats nominated Stephen Douglas for president and southern Democrats John C. Breckenridge.97

During 1858 and 1859, county Republicans nursed their party upward from the defeat of 1857. In 1858 they won 47.3% of the vote and elected one state assemblyman (John McCurdy) and the county sheriff (the popular Robert McCartney, voted constable of Carlisle for eight of the previous thirteen years).98 In 1859, the Republicans raised their vote percentage to 48.7%, re-elected John McCurdy, and won the county treasurer’s office.99 They lost a commission seat by only one vote, after a recount.100

To win the county in 1860 the Republicans had to do three things. First they had to hold onto the core constituency illuminated in 1857: the 45% of voters who wanted to stop slavery. Then they had to win over most of those old-line Whigs who were more interested in the tariff than free soil and frightened by sectional tension.
And then they had to lure at least a few Democrats who were not free soil men but were disgusted by Buchanan’s subservience to the South. Republicans appealed to the latter group in August 1859 by purporting to embrace the Democratic doctrine of popular sovereignty—that the people of the territories should regulate their institutions without outside interference (namely a federal slave code). This was an implicit abandonment of the old free soil method, a congressional ban on slavery, but not the free soil goal. After Lecompton’s defeat, it seemed slavery, not free labor, needed federal intervention to prosper.

The Republican juggling act succeeded. In the October elections, the party won a mean average of 50.5% of the vote and a majority of county offices, including the register of wills, the director of the poor, the auditor and a commissioner. Democrats elected the prothonotary and clerk of courts. Each party took one state assembly seat. When Lincoln won Cumberland County three weeks later he did even better, winning 51.5% of the vote. He likely won the bulk of old-line Whigs, for their standard-bearer, the Constitutional Union party, polled only 2.1% of the of the vote (though their supporters included the respected Whig James Hamilton).

Cumberland County Whigs had come full circle from tariffs to Know Nothingism to free soil and back to tariffs. The similarity of Whigs and Republicans can be seen by comparing their strength in the county. In October 1852 the Whig slate won Shippensburg, West Pennsboro township, Carlisle’s West Ward, Mechanicsburg, New Cumberland, and Monroe, Upper and Lower Allen, Hampden and East Pennsboro townships. Lincoln won them too. He also took normally Democratic Southampton and South Middleton townships and newly-created Penn township.

A majority of the 310 Republicans active between 1856 and 1860 had antecedents unknown today. They might have been Whigs, Democrats, Know Nothings or without prior party affiliation. They might have run for offices in township races not reported by Carlisle or Shippensburg newspapers or they might have been active for the first time. But of those Republicans with known affiliations, 119 had been Whigs before 1856. Only fifteen Republicans, such as Lemuel Todd, had been Democrats. Some old-line Whigs refused to go into the Republican party. Six, including Carlisle Chief Burgess Joseph Blair (1848-53, 1860) joined the Democrats.

Drowned Hopes

Much to its surprise, Cumberland County helped cause the Civil War. Some voters had not understood that Republicans were similar to Whigs, not identical. Whigs were a national party, Republicans sectional. Cumberland County Whigs were a tariff party that supported free soil, the Republicans a free soil
party that supported tariffs. If voters missed the difference in 1860, they remembered it well in the decades that followed secession and war. Far from reinforcing their 1860 victory, the war was a disaster for local Republicans. In 1861, the mean Republican vote percentage dropped to 47%. When the national party moved beyond free soil to genuine abolition in 1862, the county party suffered severe punishment, getting less than 43% of the vote that October. Lincoln himself won under 45% of 7200 votes cast in November 1864, despite northern victories at Mobile Bay, Atlanta and Cedar Creek. Emancipation and post-war Reconstruction—the partial fulfillment of “negro equality”—secured Democratic control of the county for the next quarter-century even as the state came under Republican control. Cumberland County was not only conservative but peculiarly so. Local Republicans began to win occasional victories after 1870 but not until the 1890s, when Republican support for civil rights and other forms of radicalism had died away, would Cumberland County begin to become “Republican Country.”

Notes
5. Ibid., August 30, 1849.
6. Ibid., February 28, 1850.
14. Some “new” delegates might have been past candidates for township races, which were not regularly reported by the Carlisle and Shippensburg press, but the contrast between one-time convention delegates and “repeat offenders” stands.
American Volunteer, November 5, 1840.


21. Ibid., October 16, 1844.

22. Ibid., October 21, 1846; November 15, 1848. American Volunteer, October 23, 1851. I measured turnout by totaling the votes cast for each office by all voters and taking the highest total for a given year. In 1850, for example, the highest number of votes was cast for the state senate race. I excluded state house candidates because there were always two of them. A small degree of ticket-splitting by voters could make the sum of each party's highest-polling candidate exceed actual turnout.

I have re-computed some vote totals between 1845 and 1860 using a spreadsheet computer program. For example, Whig Assembly candidate James Kelso appears to have received 2316 votes in 1850 rather than the 2326 shown in official returns. In a few cases the published totals appeared to be incorrect only because there was an error in one precinct's return. The Carlisle Herald's version of the November 1848 returns omitted Cass and Taylor votes in Lisburn. See Carlisle Herald, November 15, 1848. In 1852, returns published by the American Volunteer showed Whig sheriff candidate Joseph McDermott receiving a hundred votes too many in Shippensburg.

23. This conclusion was reached using a statistical device called Spearman's rho. Each of two variables—voter turnout and mean percentages for the Whigs—are ranked. The rank of one variable is subtracted from the other at each case, and the differences are squared and added together. This number is expressed as Sd2. Rho = 1 - (6 x Sd2) ÷ (number of cases - number of cases). The result can vary between -1, indicating no relation between the variables, and +1, indicating a perfect correlation. See Louise G. White and Robert P. Clark, Political Analysis: Technique and Practice (Monterey, California 1983), 218-219. Elections from 1845 to 1853 give us eleven cases. Squaring and adding the rank differences at each case produces a Sd2 of 152. The formula 1 - (6 x 152) ÷ (113 - 11) produces a rho of .31, indicating a significant relationship between turnout and Whig votes. When the 1846 election is excluded, the relationship is much stronger, with a rho of .75.

24. See October and November election returns, Carlisle Herald, Shippensburg News and American Volunteer, 1845 - 1860. East Pennsboro township was often reported as “Bridgeport” and Southampton as “Leesburg”.


26. Ibid., Sec. 9, Para. 1; Ibid., Art. IV, Sec. 2, Para. 3.


30. Ibid., 18-20.


34. “To Reflecting Men,” ibid., October 4, 1848.


38. “Whig County Meeting,” Carlisle Herald, April 17, 1850.
42. “Pierce and the Abolitionists,” ibid., September 23, 1852.
44. American Volunteer, October 23, 1851.
46. Potter, loc. cit., 232-34.
47. Ibid., 231.
48. American Volunteer, October 21, 1852; ibid., November 11, 1852.
49. “Have We a Whig Party Among Us?,” Carlisle Herald, August 24, 1853; American Volunteer, October 20, 1853.
54. Potter, loc. cit., 175-76.
57. Shippensburg News, October 20, 1855.
58. For a more detailed account of local Know Nothings, see John Weigel, “Americans Shall Rule America! The Know-Nothing Party in Cumberland County,” Cumberland County History, XV, No. 1 (1998). Note that the article errs in omitting the Know Nothing sheriff candidate's victory.
65. Carlisle American, November 12, 1856; ibid., December 10, 1856.
71. “Sound Buchanan Doctrine,” ibid., September 19, 1856. This extract, along with others quoted in the article, was probably derived from the New York Tribune, the nation's leading Republican paper, which printed it nine days earlier. See McPherson, loc. cit., 197. See also “The Southern Assailants of Northern Labor,” Shippensburg News, March 27, 1858.
72. “Shall the South Rule You?” ibid., September 26, 1856.
73. “Who are the Woolly Heads?,” ibid., September 19, 1856.
74. “Who are the Negro Worshippers?” Carlisle American, August 27, 1856.
78. “Quarterly Meeting,” Shippensburg News, July 16, 1853. See also Shippensburg News, August 11, 1855, in which a camp meeting announcement contained the hope that the constable would keep out rowdy “white niggers”.
81. “People’s Convention of Cumberland County,” ibid., February 8, 1860.
85. Foner, loc. cit., 116-17, 130.
86. Ibid., 302-03.
87. Ibid., 215.
88. American Volunteer, October 22, 1857.
89. “Why This Agitation!” ibid., September 24, 1857.
94. Potter, loc. cit., 311.
96. Potter, loc. cit., 403-04.
97. Ibid., 409-413.
98. American Volunteer, October 21, 1858.
99. Ibid., October 20, 1859.
100. “Important Error,” ibid., October 20, 1859.
101. Carlisle Herald, August 17, 1859.
103. Carlisle American, August 31, 1860; ibid., November 14, 1860.
104. American Volunteer, October 21, 1852.
105. Hampden voted Whig steadily from 1845 to 1852 but voted Democratic in all but one of the years from 1853 to 1859, so the Republicans recaptured lost ground in 1860.
107. American Volunteer, October 17, 1861.
109. Ibid., November 12, 1864.
Cumberland County's Election, October 1852

Names of precincts voting Democratic are given gray backgrounds, those voting Whig blank backgrounds. Lower Dickinson township voted Whig in this election. Loyalties of Shippensburg township are uncertain because published returns included it with Whig-leaning Shippensburg borough.

Cumberland County's Election, November 1860

Names of precincts voting Democratic are given gray backgrounds, those voting Republican blank backgrounds. Loyalties of Shippensburg township uncertain because included with Republican-leaning Shippensburg borough.