

KENTUCKY'S CONFLICT AS A BORDER STATE
DURING THE SECESSION CRISIS

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Bachelors of Arts in History

East Central University

Ada, Oklahoma

2010

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
December, 2013

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In writing this thesis I have incurred a great deal of academic as well as personal debt. First off I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Ronald A. Petrin. He took on a tedious project assisting me with edits and encouragement above and beyond the call of duty. I must also acknowledge Dr. Michael F. Logan and Dr. Joseph F. Byrnes for their service on my committee. Their comments improved the content of this thesis and provided fresh perspective. Thank you to John Phillips for assisting me in my hunt for material and finding contacts in Kentucky for important research. I must also thank my good friend, Mary Ruth Sanders, for her countless hours of editing and encouraging comments which assisted in fueling my persistence in this project. Lastly I would like to thank my wonderful husband, Clint Cox, who listened, encouraged, and edited during every process of this work. He allowed his home to be taken over by books and numerous papers while enduring my writing process. I sincerely thank you all.

Name: SHAE SMITH COX

Date of Degree: DECEMBER, 2013

Title of Study: KENTUCKY'S CONFLICT AS A BORDER STATE DURING THE
SECESSION CRISIS

Major Field: HISTORY

Abstract: This paper will argue that Kentucky was not guided by nationalism but by economic self-interest, its use of slavery, and moderate "Clayite" politics. Kentucky Unionists viewed the Union as the appropriate choice for protecting their property, including their slaves. Slavery in Kentucky revolved around small farms with few slaves rather than the predominant plantation culture of the cotton South. Kentucky had a large population consisting of small farmers, specifically in the East, who had no economic interest in slavery. Despite an affinity for slavery, Kentucky politics typically followed the ideals of Henry Clay concerning compromise and neutrality. This meant Kentucky did not adhere to southern nationalism and the call to protect slavery, nor did Kentucky favor the industrial North. Kentucky held greater concern for its regional interests than national ones. To fully understand Kentucky's reasoning for remaining neutral, one must understand first the history of the state's economy, including the role of slavery, and the legacy of Henry Clay in the state's politics.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION: HISTORIOGRAPHY OF KENTUCKY.....	1
II. KENTUCKY’S POPULATION AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND.....	10
III. DEVELOPMENT OF KENTUCKY POLITICS.....	32
IV. AN UNCOMMITTED STATE AFFECTED BY SECESSION	50
V. CONCLUSION: THE INVASION OF KENTUCKY.....	73
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	79

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1.....	11

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1.....	18

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: HISTORIOGRAPHY OF KENTUCKY

In December 1861, during the winter of secession, Robert J. Breckinridge, a prominent Republican and Unionist from Kentucky, wrote a series of pamphlets discussing the importance of remaining in the Union and resisting the urge to secede. “The profitable continuance of negro slavery anywhere on this continent,” he wrote, “and its continuance at all in the Border Slave States, depends absolutely upon the existence of a common national government embracing both the Free States and the Slave States.” Breckinridge affirmed that our “political system, affords not only the highest, but the only effectual protection for interests that are local and exceptional-and at the same time out of sympathy with the general judgment of mankind.” He concluded that “of all possible interests, that of the owners of slaves, in a free country stands most in need of the protection of such a system.” Breckinridge attempted to encourage members of Kentucky to remain in the Union in order to protect their financial interests. According to Breckinridge, the Union provided the best option for property protection for Kentuckians.¹

¹ John C. Breckinridge, *The Civil War: Its Nature and End* (Cincinnati: Office of the Danville Review, 1861), 645-646.

Unionists like Breckinridge were among those vying for Kentucky's loyalty during the secession crisis. With the threat of war looming, Kentucky faced a dilemma: should Kentucky remain in the Union or secede with other slave states? Kentuckians needed to decide which government would best protect their economic interests. Kentuckians also debated which side would share the moderate political views promoted for much of the past half-century by Henry Clay, the statesman from Kentucky. Kentucky, unlike other border states, did not immediately align with northern or southern counterparts; instead Kentuckians remained uniquely moderate in their politics.

Historical writings dating to 1885 give an account of the Civil War, its statistics, and the aftermath in Kentucky but fail to mention Kentucky's unique role during the secession crisis. From 1885 to 1950 most historians were uniform in their observations. They described events but did not give a critical analysis of why the circumstances in Kentucky were different than other states. Most leave out the efforts made to change political opinion in Kentucky during the secession crisis or the reason for its vote for neutrality. The exception is E. Merton Coulter's *The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky* (1926).²

Coulter's interpretation of political events in Kentucky proved to be more advanced than popular at the time. He was able to capture the unique position of Kentucky before, during, and after the war. In chapter two, Coulter points out the difficult

² Zachary F. Smith, *The History of Kentucky* (Louisville and Chicago, 1885); W. H. Perrin, J.H. Battle, and G. C. Kniffin, *Kentucky: A History of the State* (F. A. Battey & Company, 1888); Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, 1885 *Kentucky: A Pioneer Commonwealth* (Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, Kentucky, 1885); Robert McNutt McElroy, *Kentucky In The Nation's History* (New York: New York 1909); Samuel M. Wilson, *History of Kentucky, Volume II: From 1803 to 1928* (Chicago-Louisville, 1928); William H. Townsend, *Lincoln and His Wife's Home Town* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1929); J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 1940); Frederick A. Wallis and Hambleton Tapp, *A Sesqui-Centennial History of Kentucky*, IV Volumes (Hopkinsville: Kentucky, 1946); J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *A Bibliography of Kentucky History* (Lexington: Kentucky, 1949).

questions before the state in 1860-1861. In the next five chapters, he shows how the state adopted neutrality, which policies seriously affected Southern trade, the difficulty of maintaining a neutral position, the eventual abandonment of that position, and how Union sympathizers expelled the Confederates. He presents the case that Kentucky never wholeheartedly made up its mind. Kentucky was drawn to the South by personal and social ties. It had a growing commerce with the Gulf States, but most importantly a fear for the safety of the institution of slavery. Coulter believed Kentucky held the same ties to slavery, which existed in its more fertile agricultural counties, as deep southern states. He also shows how the cities along the Ohio border had a strong northern tie because of their dependence on trade.³ Coulter's thesis is problematic because he does not give proper significance to the slave trade. Kentucky's use of slavery was broader than he mentioned.

The next grouping of literature for Kentucky is between 1955 and 1997. During this time historians produced several books written on the history of Kentucky or President Abraham Lincoln's relationship with the state and how it shaped his beliefs. Although valid and insightful, these works did not specifically address the tensions and issues with the election of 1860 or neutrality during the secession crisis.⁴ However the latest grouping of literature, from 2000 to the present, attempts to tackle these issues.

³ E. Merton Coulter, *The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1926).

⁴ William H. Townsend, *Lincoln and the Bluegrass: Slavery and Civil War in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1955); Joseph O. Van Hook, *The Kentucky Story* (Chattanooga: Tennessee, Harlow Publishing, 1970); G. Glenn Clift, *Kentucky in Retrospect: Noteworthy Personages and Events in Kentucky History, 1792-1967* (Frankfort: The Kentucky Historical Society, 1967); George M. Chinn, *Kentucky Settlement and Statehood* (Frankfort, Kentucky, 1975); Hambleton Tapp and James C. Klotter, *Kentucky Decades of Discord, 1865-1900* (Frankfort: Kentucky, 1977); Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1997).

Kent Masterson Brown, in the introduction of *Civil War in Kentucky: Battle for the Bluegrass State*, wrote that even though Kentucky had economic ties with the North, it was a southern state because of slavery. He claims that the state possessed an “unusual if not unique role” but most of the following essays failed to truly elaborate on the specific differences between Kentucky and the other southern states. This thesis states that Kentucky was different from other southern states during the secession crisis because they took economic advantage of both the Union and Confederacy. From the same collection of essays, historian Charles P. Roland notes that Kentucky’s attempt at remaining neutral was futile. Roland strongly emphasizes the secessionist elements in Kentucky and the attempt to create a Confederate government.⁵

In another collection of essays, *Sister States, Enemy States: The Civil War in Kentucky and Tennessee*, Gary R. Matthews argues that “In the end, a pragmatic respect for Northern economic dominance and a love for the historic national identity bolstered by a trust in the democratic process inspired a majority of Kentuckians to seek preservation of property and self by resisting the temptations of secession.” Matthews argues that Kentucky’s economic interests were rooted in the North, and so they adhered to northern nationalism. Recent scholarship continues to present conflicting views on the nature of Kentucky’s loyalty.⁶

⁵ Kent Masterson Brown, ed., *Civil War in Kentucky: Battle for the Bluegrass State* (Mason City, Iowa: Savas Publishing, 2000), i; Charles P. Roland, “The Confederate Defense of Kentucky,” in Brown, *Civil War in Kentucky*, 23.

⁶ Gary R. Matthews, “Beleaguered Loyalties,” in Kent T. Dollar, Larry H. Whiteaker, and W. Calvin Dickinson, eds., *Sister States Enemy States: The Civil War in Kentucky and Tennessee* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2009), 9. See also: Anne E. Marshall, *Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010); James L. Huston, *Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2003); William H. Townsend, *Lincoln and the Bluegrass: Slavery and Civil War in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1955).

Thomas C. Mackey has an article in the same collection as Matthews, *Sister States, Enemy States*. Mackey specifically disagrees with Coulter's belief that Kentucky was a pariah; his central argument is that Kentucky was a major keystone during the secession crisis and Civil War. One of the key points of his argument is the importance to assess from which states Kentuckians originated. He specifically mentions the states of Virginia and North Carolina to explain Kentucky's affinity for slavery. Mackey states the importance of examining the "ties of blood and livelihood". He also believes that Kentuckians followed Virginian political leadership.

Mackey explains the political importance of Henry Clay's policies on slavery and economics even after his death. The author believes that Kentuckians were "Unionist in their wallets and Southern in their sentiments." Mackey believes that Clay's view of slaveholding and his nationalism continued to guide Kentucky politics, opposing slavery because of the economic threat slavery posed to free white labor. They were also opposed to abolitionism. However, after making these important points Mackey fails to specifically explain the type of relationship Kentucky built with slavery.⁷

Mackey seems to think that Kentucky was Unionist and would have sided with the Union at any cost. This paper disagrees; Kentucky would have remained neutral given the opportunity because of the prospering economics during the secession crisis. They preferred moderate politics according to the 1860's election. Kentucky felt loyalty to the Union because of Clay's politics but not nationalism.

Many historians assume Kentucky was a southern state. However, as historian Anne Marshall points out in *Creating a Confederate Kentucky, the Bluegrass State*

⁷Thomas C. Mackey, "Not a Pariah, but a Keystone: Kentucky and Secession" in Kent T. Dollar, Larry H. Whiteaker, and W. Calvin Dickinson, eds., *Sister States Enemy States: The Civil War in Kentucky and Tennessee* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2009), 25-42.

became culturally Confederate after the war. To consider Kentucky a Confederate state during the war is misguided. Yes, Kentucky shared in the institution of slavery like others who sided with the Confederacy; this gave them a southern nature, but that affiliation was not strong enough to convince Kentucky to side with the Confederacy. Therefore, it was not a typical southern state. Kentucky did not have the strong nationalism for the Union or the Confederacy that some historians argue. Marshall disagrees with Coulter in this aspect stating that his beliefs were too simplistic and that Kentucky did not have the collective consciousness that older historians suggested because they were only considering the white perspective. The desire for preservation of the Union could be considered nationalistic, but the determining factors for Kentucky were economics and the protection of property. In Kentucky, property meant, among other things, slaves. But Kentucky being a slave state does not necessarily categorize it as a Confederate state because of the distinct differences between slavery in Kentucky and the Deep South.⁸

Many questions remain about Kentucky. To what extent did both northern and southern nationalism exist in Kentucky and to what extent did they affect Kentucky's loyalty? How can a state comprised of migrants from slave states such as Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee be primarily Unionist? How did the long term cause and their relationship with slavery affect Kentucky's decision and economic interests? What was it about Kentucky that contributed to its remaining in the Union?

⁸ See also: Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989); Nelson D. Lankford, *Cry Havoc! The Crooked Road to Civil War, 1861* (London: Viking Penguin, 2007); John Majewski, *Modernizing a Slave Economy: The Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2009), Anne E. Marshall, *Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010).

This paper will argue that Kentucky was not guided by nationalism but by economic self-interest, its use of slavery, and moderate “Clayite” politics. Kentucky Unionists viewed the Union as the appropriate choice for protecting their property, including their slaves. Slavery in Kentucky revolved around small farms with few slaves rather than the predominant plantation culture of the cotton South. Kentucky had a large population consisting of small farmers, specifically in the East, who had no economic interest in slavery. Despite an affinity for slavery, Kentucky politics typically followed the ideals of Henry Clay concerning compromise and neutrality. This meant Kentucky did not adhere to southern nationalism and the call to protect slavery, nor did Kentucky favor the industrial North. Kentucky held greater concern for its regional interests than national ones. Louisville, which next to Cincinnati was the greatest commercial city on the Ohio River, prospered on trade more with the North than with the South. That section was extremely hostile to the idea of secession. To fully understand Kentucky’s reasoning for remaining neutral, one must understand first the history of the state’s economy, including the role of slavery, and the legacy of Henry Clay in the state’s politics.

The second chapter will focus on Kentucky’s background and the development of its economics prior to the secession crisis. The settlement of Kentucky needs to be highlighted in order to understand the factors behind Kentucky’s arduous decisions. Many Kentuckians emigrated from Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee, all ardent slave states. These states, as well as slave trade, influenced Kentucky’s economy, trade, and its general social structure. Many settlers were from southern slave states, which meant they brought with them the particular institution that became a significant part of their lives, allowing Kentucky to transition from a frontier state to an economic

crossroads between the North and South. Kentucky also maintained northern connections with the states Ohio, Indiana, and Pennsylvania both through the migration of people and through the waterways, railroads, and goods that tied them to Kentucky industry.

Chapter three highlights how Henry Clay exhibited moderate Kentucky politics. It is important to note the influence of Henry Clay's political philosophy on later leaders in Kentucky. Clay's American System allowed Kentucky to transport goods, such as mules, horses, and tobacco, more efficiently, creating prosperity and expanding the state's role in the slave trade. Clay's role in the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850 evidenced the moderating view shared by Kentuckians. Rather than ignite animosities on either side of the slavery issue, Clay and his fellow Kentuckians relied on compromise and neutrality to ensure continued economic growth. Political moderation set the groundwork for Kentucky politics during the secession crisis.

The fourth chapter discusses how the secession of the South presented Kentucky's government with a dilemma. Many Kentuckians were extremely protective of slavery and their fear of slave emancipation fueled social racism. The election of 1860 divided Kentucky politics between native John C. Breckinridge and John Bell of Tennessee. Breckinridge surprisingly lost in his home state to Bell who ran on the Unionist ticket and promoted both the preservation of slavery and the Union. When it became clear that the Union would split, Kentucky's leaders debated their state's future. A group of Conditional Unionists attempted to persuade the people to remain loyal to the Union on the condition of respected neutrality. Unionists and secessionists bombarded Kentucky with propaganda enticing them to join their cause. Other southern states, especially

South Carolina, were particularly active. Both sides considered Kentucky a valuable asset because of its location and resources.

Chapter five describes how the secession crisis ended with the invasion of Kentucky in September 1861. Confederate General Leonidas Polk shattered Kentucky's neutrality and invaded Columbus. This prompted Kentucky's decision to officially align itself with the North. Unionists in Kentucky's state government invited the Union to drive out the invading Confederates. Although Kentuckians began providing the North with troops and supplies, few ultimately served in the war, emphasizing their traditional neutrality towards national issues. Despite Kentucky's loyalty to the Union by late 1861, it continued to be a relatively neutral player in the war.

Kentucky's role during the secession crisis was complicated. Its people came from many southern states, which influenced the development of institutions such as slavery and agriculture. But Kentucky was not exclusively a northern or southern state. Kentucky's economic interests aligned with both the North and South. These interests encouraged powerful political leaders to guide the politics and people on the path of neutrality long promoted by their political icon, Henry Clay. Kentucky politicians sought to preserve their state and way of life, but the battle over their loyalty became literal. With the Confederacy invading from Tennessee, Kentucky joined the Union cause not out of nationalism, but out of economic preservation.

CHAPTER II

KENTUCKY'S POPULATION AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

The unique heritage of Kentucky is critical when considering Kentucky's arduous decision of whether or not to join other slave states in seceding in 1861. Kentucky residents emigrated from both ardent slave states such as Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee as well as northern free states like Ohio, Indiana, and Pennsylvania.⁹ The majority of people residing in Kentucky during 1860 were from the slaveholding states of Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. Migrants from the northern states of Ohio, Indiana, and Pennsylvania comprised twenty percent of Kentucky's population. These migrants influenced Kentucky's economy, trade, and general social structure. Southern migrants brought with them the particular institution that became a significant part of their lives, but in a different way than the Deep South. Kentucky was a crossroads between the North and South settled by small slave holders more concerned with domestic trade and manufacturing development than with the expansion of plantation agriculture. Kentucky quickly transitioned from a frontier state to an economic hub between the North and South.

⁹ See 1860 U.S. Census Data Table

1860 US Census Data			
#	State	Population	%
1	Virginia	45,310	30%
2	Tennessee	34,127	23%
3	Ohio	14,419	10%
4	North Carolina	13,609	9%
5	Indiana	7,883	5%
6	Pennsylvania	7,841	5%
7	Maryland	4,412	3%
8	New York	4,170	3%
9	Illinois	2,617	2%
10	Missouri	2,585	2%
Sum of top 10		136,973	92%
Remaining 27		11,859	8%
Total		148,832	100%

Land ownership motivated the movement west into the Kentucky country.

Farmers from Virginia, primarily English, Irish, Scottish, French, and German origin, ignored the Proclamation Line of 1763 prohibiting settlement of the frontier. Settlers in Kentucky struggled with setting up land plots and frequently had conflicting claims that overlapped because of inadequate surveys. Virginia established a land court in 1779 to help alleviate this issue. The court, comprised of Stephen Trigg, William Fleming, James Barbour, and Edmund Lynne, issued land warrants and approved claims. However, they failed to prevent survey duplications and a registry of warrants. The court's lack of efficiency led to significant legal problems, which in turn allowed for young lawyers like John Cabell Breckinridge and Henry Clay to gain valuable notoriety.¹¹

Kentucky, like many frontier territories, underwent change in intervals. The first adventurers were trappers and hunters, like Daniel Boone, followed by the Indian fighters

¹⁰ U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*. Washington, D.C., 1860, 176- 187.

¹¹ Thomas D. Clark, *A History of Kentucky* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1937), 85-90.

and surveyors. They were followed by the land squatters as well as planters who bought large tracts of land and expanded their plantations. Overseers and slaves arrived ahead of the plantation families, mainly in the Bluegrass area to prepare the land for settlement and agriculture. Through this process Kentucky became a place for the gentry's younger sons in Virginia to make their start because Virginia's land laws gave precedence to the older sons of planters allowing them to inherit their father's estates thereby forcing the younger sons to make their fortunes elsewhere.¹²

The early settlers in Kentucky found Indians already inhabiting the area. Kentuckians faced problems with local and northern Indian tribes specifically the Cherokee and Shawnee. The Indians wanted to drive the settlers out because they were encroaching on tribal land and hunting territory. This made it difficult for settlers to raise crops and livestock as well as bring in supplies. A few men through Kentucky's early history successfully battled the Indians to protect their people and establishments. Between 1783 and 1790 problems with Indians flared up again specifically with the Wabash River tribes and the Miami tribe. It was estimated that about fifteen hundred people were captured or killed along with around twenty thousand horses stolen.¹³ Men enlisted to fight the Indians, but they did not care for fighting under commissioned officers because they did not believe that the new commissioned officers were familiar with methods used in frontier warfare. After several defeats and the failure of the federal government to protect Kentucky from Indian raids, President George Washington appointed General "Mad" Anthony Wayne as commander of the western branch of the

¹² Clark, *A History of Kentucky*, 90-95.

¹³ Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Koltter, *New History of Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1997), 6-7; 33-35; 70-71.

army. On July 26th, 1794, American forces regrouped and, on August 30th, they challenged the Indians at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. Wayne's strategy was successful as the Americans suffered only thirty-three dead and one hundred wounded. This battle freed Kentuckians from the Indian raids of the North.¹⁴

One of the last major battles Kentuckians had with Indians concerned Tecumseh and The Prophet. They clashed with William Henry Harrison because he attempted to persuade the Indians to cede their land with the promise of protecting them from the white settlers. Some Indians ceded the land along the Wabash River accounting for 2.5 million acres. This angered Tecumseh which caused him to rally his confederation to attack Harrison on November 6, 1811, an offensive known as the Battle of Tippecanoe. Convinced that Americans were not trustworthy, Tecumseh sought an alliance with the British.¹⁵

Kentucky's road to statehood was extremely difficult as evidenced by the ten conventions it took to ratify a constitution. Issues ranged from debates over the legitimacy of Virginia's requirement of equal county representation, abandoning religious and property qualifications during the fifth convention to allow free white males of age to vote, to even having to conclude the fourth convention early due to too many delegates fighting Indians. At one time delegates even debated a complete separation not only from Virginia but from the United States as a whole to seek an alliance with Spain. After

¹⁴ Clark, *A History of Kentucky*, 90-95; 138-144.

¹⁵ Harrison and Koltter, *New History of Kentucky*, 88.

nearly ten years of conventions, Kentucky finally gained statehood on June 1, 1792, becoming the fourteenth state to enter the Union.¹⁶

In 1798, Kentucky adopted resolutions that reflected Jeffersonian ideals. At Cheapside in Lexington George Nicholas, a law professor at Transylvania University, denounced Federalist laws, the Alien and Sedition Acts, claiming that they attacked American freedom. At that same meeting, Henry Clay gained notoriety for his republican views. Kentucky's press worked hard against these laws and encouraged Thomas Jefferson to use Kentucky in his fight against them. Jefferson authored the Kentucky Resolution which argued that the Alien and Sedition Acts were unconstitutional, and he created the idea of nullification. The Kentucky Resolution proclaimed "that the several states who formed that instrument (the Constitution) being sovereign and independent, have the unquestionable right to judge of its infractions; and that a nullification, by those sovereignties, of all unauthorized acts done under colour of that instrument is the rightful remedy."¹⁷ Kentucky, like Virginia, was more adamant about states' rights during Adams' administration than other southern states, a drastically different stance than during the secession crisis.

This was one of the first acts of promoting states' rights over federal authority. On November 10, 1798, the Kentucky Resolution passed, leaving Democratic-Republicans in control. Now in a position of power, the Democratic-Republicans took the opportunity to reevaluate Kentucky's first constitution; believing it to be a failure. Preparations were made to hold another constitutional convention. After much debate and voting, the

¹⁶ Harrison and Koltter, *New History of Kentucky*, 58-64.

¹⁷ J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1940), 4-20.

second constitution passed on June 1st, 1800. The second constitution was fairly conservative and reorganized the state government and established laws guarding against any attempt to emancipate slaves. Under the new constitution, slavery could not be eliminated without the consent of slaveholders. From the beginning, Kentucky cultivated a unique form of slavery due to its government and economics.¹⁸

The institution of slavery, and what it meant for Kentucky, was different from the other southern states. Since many Kentuckians emigrated from slave states, they brought with them the peculiar institution. It became the foundation of their economy, but for Kentucky slavery existed on a much smaller scale. In Kentucky slaves functioned as small farm laborers unlike their plantation counterparts in the Cotton South, thus establishing Kentucky's unique use of slavery.

Strong ties with slave states such as Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee allowed Kentucky to develop a prosperous economy. Slaves comprised about twenty-four percent of Kentucky's population in 1830. Many of the slaves resided in the region between Louisville and Lexington, controlled primarily by small planters. Slave labor drove Kentucky's growing hemp economy aiding in the growth of the Bluegrass Region, the lands around Louisville and Lexington where large slaveholders resided. The Bluegrass Region held over 124,000 slaves, fifty-five percent of Kentucky's total in 1860. By 1840 Kentucky was the leading hemp producer in the nation and its economy expanded to manufacturing ropes and bags. Southern states purchased these bags for packaging cotton and, with a booming cotton economy; Kentucky's hemp remained in

¹⁸Clark, *A History of Kentucky*, 152-163; Victor B. Howard, *Evangelical War against Slavery and Caste* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University, 1996), 34-47.

high demand. Tobacco, Kentucky's other primary staple crop, had a short growing season and required less slave labor than cotton, which contributed to Kentucky's propensity to support small slaveholders over large plantation owners. To many Kentuckians, the words "planter" and "farmer" became interchangeable by 1835 because of the relative absence of a typical southern plantation. According to the 1860 census only seven Kentucky men listed themselves as planters.¹⁹ To qualify as a planter a person must have owned twenty or more slaves.

The North and the industries it represented proved to be of great import to Kentucky. Kentuckians both imported from and exported to the North through the multiple railroads that tied them with those states.²⁰ The majority of Kentucky's exports consisted of agricultural produce and livestock. Products such as ginseng and whiskey could turn a profit when sent to Philadelphia. Several goods were exported downstream where they were loaded on ships and sent to East Coast ports or to European markets. The establishment of railroads allowed a trading surplus of products like horses, meat, and corn with the large cities and manufacturing towns of the North.²¹

The dominance of small slaveholders created a type of relationship between master and slave in Kentucky different from any other state with slaves. In 1860 there were 110,937 men registered as farmers.²² Since Kentucky's early settlement, slaves and

¹⁹ Anne E. Marshall, *Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010), 10-12; J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, 40-45; U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*. Washington, D.C., 1860, 176 and 187.

²⁰ E. Merton Coulter, *The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1926), 10-11.

²¹ Harrison and Koltter, *New History of Kentucky*, 141-143.

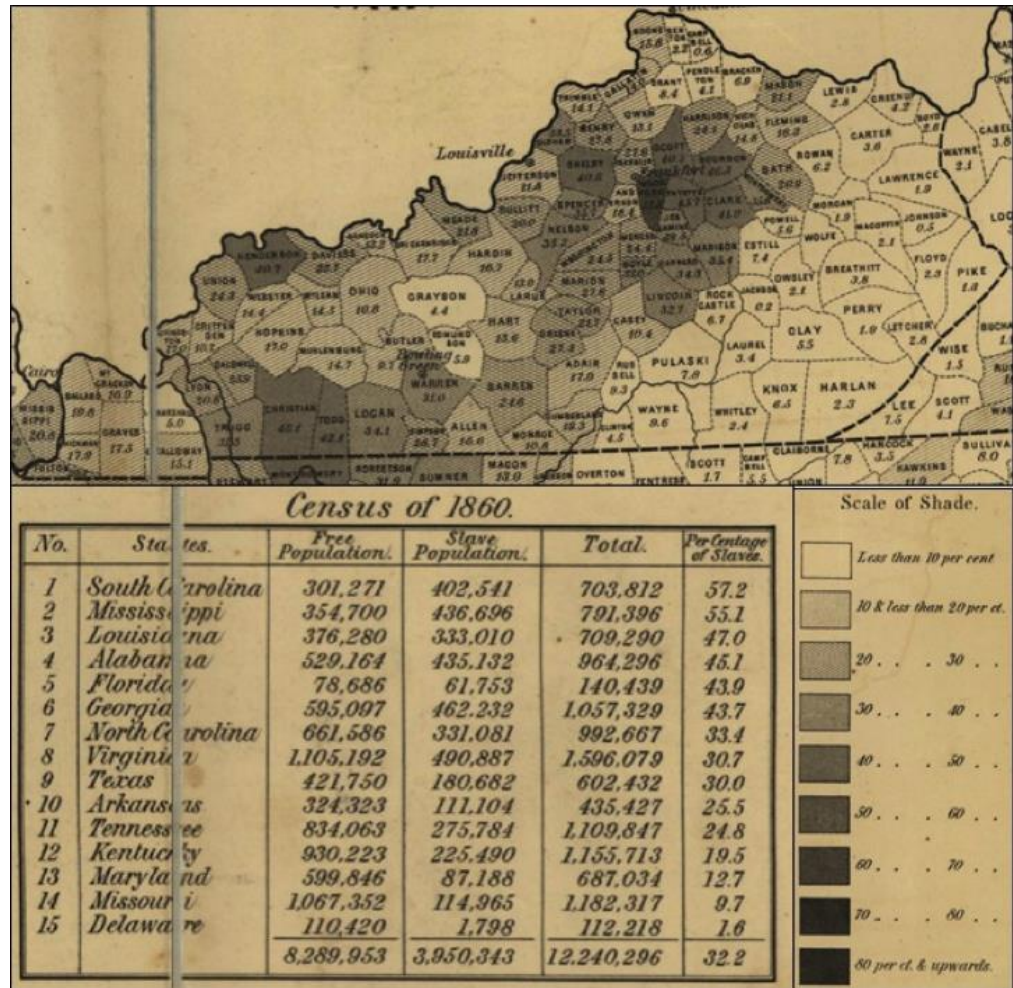
²² U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*. Washington, D.C., 1860, 186.

masters worked together. Whether it was working in the fields or warding off Indian raids, this relationship had a different meaning. One of the reasons for the unique relationship between master and slave was that there were no other sources of cheap labor especially during Kentucky's early settlement. Many of the immigrants moving to Kentucky were of German descent and, since slavery did not exist in their country, they did not have much inclination towards it. Many Germans settled along the Ohio River and in Jefferson County which had minimal slavery. Kentucky had a dramatic increase in its population between 1790 and 1800, which led to the division of the land into small farms. This caused a change evolving Kentucky's use of slavery to a smaller scale unique form unlike those in the deep southern states.²³

In lieu of large-scale, plantation-based slavery, Kentucky slaveholding evolved differently. By 1850 about twenty-eight percent of white families owned slaves with the average slaveholder owning around five slaves. According to the 1860 census Kentuckians had more slaveholders than any other state except Virginia and Georgia, but they had far fewer slaves. Compared to other border states, Kentucky had fewer slaves per capita. For instance, in 1860, Kentucky had a larger population than Tennessee while maintaining eighteen percent fewer slaves overall. Virginia, however, exceeded Kentucky's population by only sixteen percent and maintained a slave population nearly twice that of Kentucky's. No Kentucky family owned over three hundred slaves and in many instances owned as few as one. These are much smaller numbers than the average for a plantation society as well as other border states. Owners who possessed one to five slaves constituted the greatest number of Kentucky slaveholders, around thirteen

²³ Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, 40-50; Clark, *A History of Kentucky*, 274-302.

thousand in all. Kentucky was an economically prosperous state that utilized a smaller, less rigid form of slavery to support, rather than expand, the growing cotton industry of the South.²⁴



Beyond hemp and tobacco, the Bluegrass state also provided meat, grain, livestock, and slaves. Many slaves who labored in the Deep South harvesting cotton were

²⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850*. Washington, D.C., 1850; U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*. Washington, D.C., 1860; Edward Smith, *The Borderland in the Civil War* (New York: Freeport Books for Libraries, 1969), 16,17,24,25; Marshall, *Confederate Kentucky*, 12-13; Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, 173-195. Figure 1, Census 1860 map.

²⁵ Figure 1, Showing the Distribution of the Slave Population of the Southern States of the United States. Compiled from the Census of 1860. Washington, September 1861.

from Kentucky. The climate and soil in Kentucky were not suited for a plantation system. Tobacco crops exhausted the soil, but it was the main form of agricultural labor for which slavery would be an advantage. Kentuckians felt slaves required too much supervision for simple tasks during the planting, cultivation, and cutting of tobacco. Kentucky also did not have one staple crop but five, thus allowing for a diverse agricultural system. Kentucky's staple crops of wheat, corn, rye, tobacco, and hemp rendered slavery less useful because they required careful supervision, more than Kentuckians wanted to provide. It was difficult to keep slavery profitable during both of the growing seasons.²⁶

Kentucky's good farming soil allowed for lush grasslands and grain production which supported raising livestock and proved to be more profitable because it, unlike tobacco and hemp, was easily transported to eastern markets. For many farmers the mule was as important as a slave. Livestock passing over the Cumberland Ford in 1828 was estimated to be worth \$1,100,000. This included 3,412 horses, 3,228 mules, 97,455 hogs, 2,141 sheep, and 1,525 stall-fed cattle. Within ten years, the value of livestock increased to \$1,750,000. The growth of other industries caused Kentucky slavery to become less important and gave way to another profitable venture, the domestic slave trade.²⁷

The domestic slave trading profits surged in Kentucky from 1820-1830. Afterward Kentucky transitioned towards an expansive domestic slave trade market for the next thirty years. The value of slaves increased in the states of Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas in 1845 because of rapid expansion of cotton plantations. As a result Kentuckians sold their slaves for great profit. Slaves were commonly shipped down

²⁶ Frederic Bancroft, *Slave Trading in the Old South* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1931), 123-124.

²⁷ Clark, *A History of Kentucky*, 276-277; Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, 142-175.

the Mississippi River where they were groomed and sold to planters in places like Rodney and Natchez, Mississippi, or New Orleans. As new territory opened in the South for cotton production, some Kentuckians took the opportunity to move south to expand their own landholdings where they found more slaves were needed helping to increase the demand for slaves from their home state. While the state benefited from slavery, thereby separating it from northern ideals, Kentucky's economy was definitively shaped by the trading of slaves instead of traditional plantation agriculture and thus distinguished from the rest of the South.²⁸

For many Kentuckians the domestic slave trade grew into a profitable business. According to J. Winston Coleman, Jr., the trading of slaves began with a somewhat innocent practice of purchasing and swapping of slaves between individual owners to satisfy their own needs. However, a moral line was clearly defined and to be known as a “nigger trader” was degradation to any man. Many Kentuckians viewed the buying and selling of slaves for profit as detestable. Men who stooped to become traders performed the practice of splitting up families and covering up the physical defects of slaves for a larger profit. It is not clear when the slave trade in Kentucky began, but one account from 1818 noted a scene of fourteen slaves traveling on flatboats heading down the Mississippi. J. Winston Coleman, Jr., wrote that the slave trade became a lucrative business for Kentuckians, and “in the 1850s alone, traders sold approximately 15 percent of the state’s slaves southward.” Slavery was losing its grip on its importance in Kentucky; the slave trade was growing because the usefulness of slavery within

²⁸ T.D. Clark, “Slave Trade between Kentucky and the Cotton Kingdom,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (Dec. 1934), 331-332; William W. Freehling, *The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Organization of American Historians, 2001), 20, 27.

Kentucky was diminishing.²⁹ About seventy-seven thousand slaves were sold south over three decades. Annually the average of Kentucky slaves exported was approximately twenty-three thousand.³⁰

Kentucky slave traders preferred to take their slaves to the South in the autumn. It allowed for better travel conditions and encouraged planters to purchase more because it followed the harvest season for cotton and sugar cane. If traders waited until the fall slaves were usually sent by water primarily along the Ohio River to the Mississippi River. Some traders would send their slaves south in the summer months to help prepare them for their new lives in a much hotter climate. Traders stressed acclimation because around twenty-five percent of slaves would not survive in the Deep South when coming from Maryland, Virginia, or Kentucky. For traders, slaves who could not survive in the new climate could not yield a profit.³¹

The belief remained that slave trading was evil despite the profitability. There was a significant amount of support for the passage of the Non-Importation Act of 1833. Nicknamed the Negro Law of 1833, it prohibited slaves to be brought into Kentucky for selling purposes. Slave traders were forced to rely on natural increases of slaves in Kentucky for their shipments to southern markets. Some border states, including Kentucky, understood that loophole and bred slaves to be sold to southern markets. Close attention was paid to the breeding and care of slaves much akin to that of horses and mules. Kentucky traders made such a large profit because they raised and shipped slaves downriver. This allowed companies, such as Hughes & Downing and Griffin & Pullum

²⁹ Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* , 142-185.

³⁰ Harrison and Koltter, *New History of Kentucky*,143.

³¹ Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* , 142-185.

from Lexington, that were established in 1843, to exist for the sole purpose of acquiring slaves in Kentucky and selling them to the South. Businesses like these were common and considered similar to livestock trading firms, particularly because auction sales for livestock were common. Slave trading and the businesses that specialized in this helped to define the economy of the Kentucky in the early 19th century.³²

Slave trading companies proved to be incredibly profitable in Kentucky. In October 1843, Hughes & Downing purchased thirteen slaves in Kentucky for \$5,292.50. Companies were able to sell these slaves in 1844 for \$8,695. It cost the company \$257.72 to transport the slaves from Lexington to Natchez, which netted them a profit of \$3,144.76. In the Upper South, a Virginia railroad master machinist would make on average \$84 a year in 1859. A skilled laborer would typically earn a yearly income of \$50 to \$150 between 1855 and 1860. Compared to the typical income of the period, Hughes & Downing made a handsome profit.³³

Slave trading profitability was due in part to the rising prices of slaves during the cotton boom of the 1840s and 1850s. From 1846 to 1860, the price of a prime male field hand nearly doubled from \$690 to \$1,318. This price increase can be attributed to the southern economy recovering and prospering from the cotton depression of the late 1830s. From 1840 to 1860, the slave population in Kentucky increased 6.87 percent. The slave trade was clearly significant to Kentucky's economy.³⁴

³² Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* , 142-148.

³³ Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* , 151-153.

³⁴ Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* , 151-153; Robert Evans, Jr., "Some Economic Aspects of the Domestic Slave Trade, 1830-1860" *Southern Economic Journal* , 27, (April, 1961), 331, 334; Clark, *A History of Kentucky*, 302, 288.

By 1859, the slave trade was a booming business. In Paris, Kentucky, for example, slaves who were eighteen years old sold for \$1,135 to \$1,220. Females who were sixteen and seventeen years old went for \$435 to \$695. Males about twenty-four years old sold for \$1,200 cash. In Georgetown on January 1st, 1859, there were twenty-five slaves sold for a total of \$20,140. The prices of these purchases ranged from \$1,500 for a nineteen year old male, \$1, 550 for a twenty year old male, and \$1,190 for a thirty-two year old man. Thirteen year old girls brought in \$1,000 each and a sixteen year old girl sold for \$1,441. Slaves were often sold at high prices, based on their value as workers in the cotton fields, their ability to work in the master's home, or their reproductive value.³⁵

In 1849 Kentucky's legislature repealed the Non-Importation Act, increasing the business for slave traders. It allowed slaves from other states to be brought into Kentucky and sold on Kentucky markets. The repeal turned Kentucky into a slave market for the Deep South. Repealing the act opened the market for more people to participate in slave trading and withdrew some of the social stigma associated with it. This took away the shame of the business and allowed for social acceptance among many Kentuckians. An ad taken out in the *Lexington Observer and Reporter* stated, "I WISH to purchase a large lot of merchantable Negroes, for whom I will pay the highest market *cash price*." Without shame, the business of slave trading prospered because traders were now able to operate openly and they quickly turned to newspapers to advertise their business.³⁶

³⁵ Clark, *A History of Kentucky*, 285.

³⁶ Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, 149-159; *Lexington Observer & Reporter*, March 20, 1850.

The newly legitimized occupation of slave trading expanded its business practices drastically during the next decade. Slave “jails” became common during this period of expansion. Slaves could be jailed while waiting for a buyer. Several accounts of slave “jails” suggest they were rather comfortable being spacious and carpeted. Some works mention expensive beautiful mulatto women being choice stock for mistresses. Lexington and New Orleans were known to have a market for “fancy girls,” or slave women who were bought and sold as mistresses or concubines for the wealthy. Wealthy planters, horse breeders, and gamblers were among the best customers in these markets, and sexual abuse was not uncommon.³⁷

William Brown, a slave born in Lexington, described one such account of sexual abuse of slaves. Brown recalled one girl from his travels named Cynthia, describing her as “as one of the most beautiful women he ever saw.” Cynthia was purchased by a Mr. Walker to be sold in New Orleans. Brown was told to take Cynthia to her own room. “I had seen too much of the workings of slavery not to know what this meant. I accordingly watched him enter the state-room and listened to hear what passed between them. I heard him make his base offers and her reject them. He told her that if she would accept his vile proposals he would take her back with him to St. Louis, and establish her as his house keeper at his farm. But if she persisted in rejecting him, he would sell her as a field hand on the worst plantation on the river.” He went on to write that, “Neither threats nor bribes prevailed, however, and he retired, disappointed of his prey.” Brown goes on with his account of seeing Cynthia the next morning very upset. He explained that she went back to St. Louis with Mr. Walker to his farm where he placed her as his housekeeper and

³⁷ Bancroft, *Slave Trading*, 131.

mistress. By the time William Brown was finished working for Mr. Walker, Mr. Walker had two children with Cynthia. Later Brown learned that Walker had married another woman and sold Cynthia and their four children into “hopeless bondage.”³⁸

On several occasions, the slave traders were dishonest with their deals and sold sickly slaves to unsuspecting customers. Some passed off slaves to be younger by doctoring their appearance. In the case of Mr. Walker, Brown was in charge of grooming some of the slaves that his master wanted to sell. Mr. Walker hired, not bought, Brown from his master because of his ability to work on a boat. Mr. Walker was a slave trader, but known to slaves as a “soul driver”. In his account Brown wrote about a large room on the lower deck of the boat where the slaves were kept, both men and women. Slaves were under strict watch to ensure they did not escape. The slaves were fed well on the boat, most of them better than at home. Brown also recalled how he “had to prepare the old slaves for market” and “was ordered to have the old men’s whiskers shaved off, and the grey hairs on their heads plucked out, where they were not too numerous, in which case we had a preparation of blacking to color it, and with a blacking blush we would put it on.” He added that this “was new business to me, and [was] performed in a room where the passengers could not see us. These slaves were also taught how old they were, and after going through the blacking process they looked ten years younger.” He believed “some of the planters who purchased these slaves were dreadfully cheated, especially in the ages of the slaves they bought.”³⁹

³⁸ Narrative of William W. Brown, *A Fugitive Slave* (Boston: Anti-slavery Office, 1847), 46-48.

³⁹ Narrative of William W. Brown, *A Fugitive Slave*, 40-44.

The journey South was difficult on many slaves coming from the Border States. In order to protect their investment, slave traders purchased insurance on the slaves. One trader noted, “They die daily . . . some has actually died in the cars going south 5 or 6 has died out at Lumpkins jail . . . But all the grown ones I had insured as soon as I bought them . . .” Many slave traders were willing to pay good money to protect their investments with insurance, thus ensuring a larger return. Death, though, was not the only fear for slaves being sold downriver.⁴⁰

The fate of slaves was always uncertain. News of traders gathering slaves created much excitement and fear for slaves as shown in Mattie Griffith’s slave narrative. She was owned by a Mr. Peterkin and lived on a farm in Nelson County, Kentucky. Mr. Peterkin purchased Mattie when she was a small child and she became handmaid to his daughter, Jane. One afternoon in 1854, a trader came to the Peterkin farm wanting slaves to buy to sell downriver. After greeting the trader, two slave girls ran inside squealing “Oh, we’s in danger; a nigger-trader is talkin’ wid master,” they cried. The thought of leaving the farm and being sold down river to an unknown fate was terrifying for slaves. Upon seeing the trader, Mattie described him as “more like a fiend than a *man*.” Mr. Peterkin had his female slaves line up in the kitchen to be surveyed by the trader and, after picking through what he wanted, he turned his eyes on Mattie. He asked Mr. Peterkin, “What will you take for this yallow gal?” The master replied, “I ain’t much anxious to sell her; she is my darter Jane’s waitin’ ‘ooman, and, you see, my darters are putty much stuck up. They thinks they must have a waitin’-maid; but, if you offer a far

⁴⁰ Narrative of William W. Brown, *A Fugitive Slave*, 45-46; Evans, *Some Economic Aspects of the Domestic Slave Trade, 1830-1860*, 337.

price, maybe we will close in.” The trader countered, “Wal, as she is a fancy article, I’ll jist say take twelve hundred dollars, and that’s more an’ she’s actilly worth; but I wants her fur my *own use*; a sorter private gal like, you knows,” Coming to an understanding Mr. Peterkin said, “I reckon the bargain is closed, then.”

Mattie, knowing the disgrace that was to come at the hands of the trader, could not believe her master would sell her for such a purpose. Miss Jane reentered the kitchen asking her father who was sold. Upon finding out his intention to sell her maid she exclaimed, “She shan’t go for six thousand. I want an accomplished maid when I go up to the city, and she just suits me. Remember I have your deed of gift.” This was quite a relief to Mattie because she “felt assured that my honor would remain unstained.” Miss Jane saved Mattie from the fate of being taken by the trader, though her case was clearly an exception. Her fate would have been like the girls in the houses in Lexington and New Orleans. Despite being profitable for the state, traders were both feared by slaves and considered pariahs to decent Kentuckians who viewed their practices as amoral.⁴¹

Not all Kentuckians agreed with slave trading. William M. Pratt was a Baptist minister in Lexington, Kentucky, who felt pity for slaves being shipped downriver in the slave trade. In 1860, he encountered a slave named Nancy Lee. She approached Reverend Pratt extremely upset because her two daughters were intended for sale to the South. The father of the girls, Tony Lee, was successful in buying their freedom and gave them their papers just before he died. But slave traders visited Nancy and scammed her in order to obtain and destroy the girls’ papers. Afterward the girls were offered for sale at an

⁴¹ Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, 166-175. This work does not give an accurate depiction of this account of Mattie Griffith by concluding she was sold, which she was not; see Mattie Griffith *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (New York: J.S. Redfield, 1857), 173-175.

auction on February 13, 1860. Reverend Pratt bid for the first girl in an attempt to save her, but the price reached \$1,000. Pratt stood on the auction block and pleaded for bidders to withdraw out of compassion and human decency. He was unsuccessful and the bidding resumed, raising the price to \$1,700. The girl sold to the slave firm of Northcutt and Marshall and the second sister sold for \$1,600 to a slave trader from Covington. These events upset and made an impression on Pratt, who wrote in his diary that “such scenes are shocking to our moral natures. If God’s curse does not rest on that concern (of Negro traders) then I am no prophet. Negro traders are the greatest curse to our land, and I do wish the city council would impose such a tax as to drive them from our midst.” These words convey an intense dislike and concern for the moral wellbeing of society. Although it was morally questionable, slave trading was legal and set Kentucky’s use of slavery apart from the Cotton South.⁴²

On October 15, 1854 Abraham Lincoln expressed similar sentiments when he gave a moving speech in Peoria, Illinois concerning his opinion of slave merchants. “You have among you a sneaking individual of the class of native tyrants, known as the ‘slave dealer.’ He watches your necessities and crawls up to buy your slave at a speculative price. If you cannot help it, you sell to him; but if you can help it, you drive him from your door.” He added with disdain, “You utterly despise him. You do not recognize him as your friend or even as an honest man. Your children must not play with his; they may rollick freely with the little negroes, but not with the slave dealer’s children.” Lincoln believed that the slave traders were one of the lowest forms of people in society. Slave traders needed to be ostracized and banished from decent society. Lincoln had firsthand

⁴² Quoted in Clark, *A History of Kentucky*, 286-287.

knowledge of the slave traders and their ways while growing up in Kentucky. It was also visible when he went with his wife home to visit her family. An ad placed in the newspaper by the new tenants of the Pullum House near Lincoln's in-laws in Lexington read, "NEGROES WANTED! WE have purchased the trading house of W. A. Pullum in the city of Lexington." They wanted to purchase African Americans to sell down the river. It was astonishing how much profit was made from these businesses in Kentucky even with the moral dilemma it caused many citizens.⁴³

There were some individuals who had issues with the morality of trafficking slaves and some of these men attempted to do something about the problem. One outspoken slaveholder against the evils of slave trading was Robert Wickliffe. Nicknamed the Old Duke, Wickliffe was the largest slaveholder in the Bluegrass Region. He appeared before the legislature in 1840 condemning the growing slave trade in Kentucky and blaming the Cotton Kingdom for this evil. Wickliffe stated "that for the honor, as well as the security of our state, our next Legislature will put a stop to the abominable traffic." He continued, "We believe that, generally speaking, slaves are treated with more humanity in Kentucky than any other state in the Union, and could the horrid practice of *driving them like cattle to the market* be broken up, a great blot would certainly be wiped off our moral character." Being a large slaveholder, Wickliffe was not against owning slaves but against unjust treatment and herding them like cattle. He proudly believed that most slaves should be treated with decency and humanity in Kentucky. Trafficking slaves was disgraceful not only to the people performing the act

⁴³Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* , 149-172; *Lexington Observer and Reporter* November 24, 1855; Louis A. Warren, *The Slavery Atmosphere of Lincoln's Youth* (Fort Wayne: Indiana Lincoln Publishers, 1933), 9.

but to Kentucky as a state. His appeal was received with little enthusiasm from the General Assembly and had little success because of the profit to be gained. Unfortunately for the Old Duke, slave traders were often secretly bankrolled by the prominent men of the era behind closed doors.⁴⁴

Many people all over the South considered interstate slave trading an unbecoming element of society. Interstate slave trading was forbidden in nine different states at various times during the nineteenth century. In 1778, Virginia was the first to pass a law against the introduction of slaves prohibiting importation by land or sea. Almost every state and territory by 1803 passed laws to temporarily restrict importation of slaves from abroad. South Carolina was an important exception to other states. On December 17th, 1803, South Carolina had repealed her law and once again allowed the importation of slaves from Africa. The opening of this trade allowed 39,075 slaves to be imported through Charleston. Congress became involved in 1807, passing a bill against slave importation into the country after January 1st, 1808. Although it imposed a penalty of jail time and a steep fine attached to any violation, it was not always effective. While many states prohibited interstate slave trading, most repealed laws against importation. North Carolina repealed its law in 1818, followed by Virginia in 1819, Alabama in 1832, Louisiana in 1834, Mississippi in 1846, South Carolina in 1848, Maryland in 1850, Georgia in 1855-56, and Tennessee in 1855. Arkansas and Missouri were in need of slaves, so importation laws were never passed with the exception of criminals. Florida

⁴⁴ Robert Wickliffe, "Speech on the Negro Law" (pamphlet, Lexington, 1840), 14; Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, 150-151.

and Texas were the same in only barring criminals, but Kentucky was the only exception.⁴⁵

The Non-Importation Act of 1833 prohibited residents from buying and importing slaves even for personal use. Residents of Kentucky could bring slaves whose title was obtained “by will, descent, distribution, or marriage, or gift in consideration of marriage.” Kentucky allowed migrants to bring slaves to the state. Citizens largely disregarded the law prohibiting residents from buying and importing slaves for their personal use. This is evident by the repeal of the law in 1849. The laws for the other states, like Kentucky, were a type of police regulation; they were used “mainly to ward off evils attributed to interstate slave-traders.” These laws only temporarily affected the methods and ways of the interstate slave trade. These led to a greater political discussion over slavery in the 1850s.⁴⁶

Kentucky’s unique agriculture required less slave labor than other states. Instead of benefiting through traditional slavery, Kentucky’s practice of slave trading defined the economy of the state while distinguishing its economic interests from the North and ideals from the South. Kentucky remained a significant contributor to both economies until neutrality was violated during the secession crisis. Up and coming politician Henry Clay realized the importance of national compromise early. Through temperate politics he managed to increase Kentucky’s economic opportunities with the creation of the American System. Kentucky would quickly subscribe to Clay’s moderate politics which became his legacy staying with Kentucky long after his death.

⁴⁵ Winfield H. Collins, *The Domestic Slave Trade of the Southern States* (New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1904), 9-20; Bancroft, *Slave Trading*, 271-273.

⁴⁶ Collins, *The Domestic Slave Trade of the Southern States*, 9-20; Bancroft, *Slave Trading*, 271-273.

CHAPTER III

DEVELOPMENT OF KENTUCKY'S POLITICS: HENRY CLAY'S INFLUENCE

In 1850, Henry Clay ardently pleaded with Congress to put aside sectional differences and compromise for the love of the Union. Begging both northern and southern politicians, Clay simply stated that “before the fearful and disastrous leap is taken in the yawning abyss below...I implore, as the best blessing which Heaven can bestow upon me upon earth, that if the direful and sad event of the dissolution of the Union shall happen, I may not survive to behold the sad and heart-rendering spectacle.” Clay wanted Congress to concede a little for the good of all. Despite the strong political opposition Clay dedicated his life to keeping the Union intact.⁴⁷

Henry Clay molded Kentucky politics through his support of the American System, his views on slavery, and his emphasis on finding compromise, as seen in the Missouri Crisis of 1820-21 and the Crisis of 1850. Clay fought continually for Kentucky-oriented industries with his American system, helping the state prosper because of its

⁴⁷ Quoted in Avery Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), 251.

natural resources and geographic position. Kentuckians looked for a political hero as a replacement for Clay after his death but could not find one as influential. He held different beliefs than other politicians such as John C. Calhoun and Andrew Jackson. Clay's dominance in Kentucky and national politics shaped the future of both realms and created a path for his Clayite followers in the crisis of secession.

Most historians believe that Henry Clay, through his actions and beliefs, affected Kentucky's political opinions and policies during the 1850s. He had a compromising nature politically that lingered throughout the secession crisis. Historians acknowledge his devotion to Kentucky and the Union as well as his belief in states' rights. Because of Clay's broad influence, Thomas C. Mackey describes Kentucky as "Unionist in their wallets and Southern in their sentiments."⁴⁸

Born April 12th, 1777, Henry Clay grew up in Hanover County, Virginia. His father died while he was still young, leaving his mother to care for him and his siblings. Clay's only formal schooling was spending three years at Peter Deacon's one-room log cabin school near where they lived. Clay spent a considerable amount of time learning the ways of the planter class, particularly recreational activities such as drinking and horse racing. Despite Clay's affinity for recreation, Judge George Wythe soon noticed Clay for his impressive handwriting and offered him a job. Wythe became Clay's mentor and friend, allowing him to borrow books from his personal library and engaging in discussions with Clay over numerous topics ranging from politics to religion. Clay

⁴⁸ Thomas C. Mackey, "Not a Pariah, but a Keystone: Kentucky and Secession" in Kent T. Dollar, Larry H. Whiteaker, and W. Calvin Dickinson, eds., *Sister States Enemy States: The Civil War in Kentucky and Tennessee* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2009), 28.

learned how to carry on intellectual conversations and behave in the elite circles of society.⁴⁹

Wythe also shaped Clay's future in politics. It was Wythe who convinced Clay to become a lawyer. Wythe had too many burdens as chancellor to take on a student, but he asked Robert Brooke to instruct Clay in late 1796. With only a year of instruction, Clay was ready for his bar examination and on November 6th, 1797, began practicing law in Virginia.⁵⁰

Blonde-haired, well-dressed, and with an easy smile, Clay grew into a well-groomed young man ready for the task at hand; however, remaining in Virginia was not an appealing option. There were numerous lawyers in Richmond already, leaving him with little room to advance his career. He knew that to make himself into a prominent man he needed to go somewhere else. His family in Kentucky prospered during his absence with his brother becoming a merchant in Lexington and his mother and stepfather owning a hostelry. In 1797, Clay set out for Kentucky to make a name for himself using the lessons from his mentors.⁵¹

By 1803, Clay had won his first seat in the state House of Representatives. The following year the Kentucky Insurance Company became the target of Representative Felix Grundy. Grundy did not want the Bluegrass Region, comprised of planters, in control of the House so he took on an organization that was financially significant to them. Grundy went head-to-head with Clay in debates, but after a few days Grundy had enough votes to pass his bill and take away the banking function from the Kentucky

⁴⁹David S. Hidler and Jeanne T. Hidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American* (New York: Random House, 2010), 1-20.

⁵⁰Hidler and Hidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, 20-23.

⁵¹Hidler and Hidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, 23-25.

Insurance Company. Kentucky governor Christopher Greenup vetoed Grundy's bill citing Clay's argument. An upset Grundy managed to have the House override the veto, but this provided Clay with one more chance. Acting quickly, Henry Clay had the House demand immediate payment for an old debt from speculators who purchased state lands along Green River on credit. The spectators had gotten away with not paying for so long because of bargains made with the legislature, but this action prompted them to put pressure on the Senate which worked. The Senate did not pass Grundy's bill because of Clay's quick thinking and the Kentucky Insurance Company was able to keep its banking function. After proving himself and spending several years in the House, he was elected as speaker. Clay quickly became an important political figure for Kentucky.⁵²

His success as a politician boosted him from the state to federal level. Clay's affinity for politics and public speaking earned him a great respect among his constituents. He was elected as a Democratic-Republican to the United States Senate to fill the vacancy left by Buckner Thruston's resignation in 1810. He performed well and earned a seat as a Democratic-Republican in the House of Representatives. After 1811 Clay was re-elected five times to Congress. He held the title Speaker of the House of Representatives for the last three sessions.⁵³

When Clay arrived in Congress in 1810, he became interested in the economic development of the United States. He witnessed a debate about the military appropriations bill and found himself an avid supporter of an amendment that made the Secretary of the Navy give priority to domestic markets and suppliers over foreign sources for hemp products, specifically rope and sailcloth. Clay's home state of Kentucky

⁵² Hidler and Hidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, 32, 47-51.

⁵³ Maurice G. Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1995), 6-10.

was a major producer of those products including his own hemp crops at his plantation, Ashland.⁵⁴

Clay favored improving the American economy regardless of the controversy over the National Bank. In the legislative session of 1816, Henry Clay supported a bill that would increase the profits of textile companies in Kentucky. He wanted to protect American goods from British competition at the end of the War of 1812. He felt that the British were dumping excess goods on the United States at cheaper prices to destroy the American market. It was Clay's belief that a self-sustaining nation not be subject to foreign economic domination. A tariff Clay supported in April 1816 was only moderately protective. The rates on several imports were lower than the rates during the war. Clay did not get the protection for textile market that he wanted. His support was an attempt to protect his home state's interests.⁵⁵

Promoting a program of protective tariffs and extensive expenditures for national improvement, Clay made his first attempt in 1824 for the presidency. His first bid ended with disappointment but allowed him the appointment of Secretary of State. Clay, siding with Adams, made Jackson and his followers enemies because of their belief that he sold his influence in the corrupt bargain for the new position.⁵⁶

In his second attempt, Clay entered the 1832 presidential election as a National Republican candidate. He received heavy criticism for his American System and lost to Jackson's reelection. In 1836, Clay rebranded himself as a Whig and served in Congress until March 31st, 1842, when he resigned. Clay ran for president on the Whig ticket in

⁵⁴ Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System*, 10-12.

⁵⁵ Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System*, 20-21.

⁵⁶ Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1997), 119-120.

1844 and was defeated by James K. Polk. His last political contribution was his efforts in the Compromise of 1850. As a senator, Clay dedicated his life towards the progress of the Union while contending with a nation torn by strong opposition from other political rivals.⁵⁷

On May 10th, 1820, Clay introduced his famous “American System” to illustrate not only his plan for national economic sovereignty but also a commitment to republican liberty without the corruption of old European ways. The passing of the Tariff of 1824 established the American System. There were some who fought Clay because of the 1824 tariff. Members of Congress from South Carolina exclaimed that Clay was pushing for an unfair sectional advantage for Kentucky and her hemp industry. In part, their complaint was based on an extra tax added to the shipping of southern cotton. Although the House of Representatives debated this issue for two weeks, Clay and his supporters won by a thin margin. By the end of the debate, Clay established his economic protective principles known as the American System.⁵⁸

The basis for Clay’s American System was free enterprise among Americans only. The plan would work by placing a higher tariff on foreign imports. He wanted America to be self-reliant by increasing American manufacturing and reducing foreign trade. The US economic activity would be undertaken by American individuals.⁵⁹

As long as the war in Europe continued, the domestic market was profitable. When the war was over, American manufacturers would need to improve their

⁵⁷ Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 119-120.

⁵⁸ Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System*, 30-32; James B. Swain, *Life and Speeches of Henry Clay Vol. II* (New York: New York [Greeley & McElrath](#), 1843), 2.

⁵⁹ Hidler and Hidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, 149.

production methods to remain competitive. Clay believed that America needed to industrialize, but America could have a different fate than the British manufacturing centers. He wanted America to produce what was needed at home and not concern itself with producing for a larger market.⁶⁰

The American System faced some opposition. Popular attitudes of the 1820s changed as the country became more worried about centralization and opposed to federal projects that were built in other sections. South Carolina specifically opposed the American System because of the belief that protective tariffs favored the northern manufacturing economy. To amend this issue South Carolina attempted nullification in 1832 by proclaiming all federal laws were unconstitutional when they hampered state's rights. Clay regarded nullifiers as nonsensical; he could not bear the thought of the Union dividing. As a manner of unifying people, Clay wanted to present his program so that it would inspire economic growth and the general prosperity of the American people. He wanted to make the sections interdependent for the purpose of their own wellbeing as well as that of the common good. Clay's intention was to lower prices for the manufactured goods, allowing for a stable currency and reasonable credit for economic growth. He wanted to promote a vibrant economy based on modern roads and canals. He believed that, by joining the country economically, any form of disunion would be unthinkable.⁶¹

With the American System, Clay hoped to unite the country through internal improvements; these improvements also assisted Kentucky. Charters established in 1817 for the Lexington and Louisville Turnpike Road Company and the Louisville and

⁶⁰ Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System*, 10-12.

⁶¹ Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System*, 29-30; Hidler and Hidler *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, 149-229.

Maysville Turnpike Road Company defined a standard of roads that would carry on for decades. These would provide better transportation and funds for the state. This also created a connection between Maysville and Washington which provided jobs and quickened travel and set the bar for future projects. The American System encouraged other forms of transportation improvements such as railroad building and canals.⁶²

Clay defended the American System faithfully. In a speech to the Senate in February 1832, Clay stated that “the danger to our Union does not lie on the side of persistence in the American System, but on that of its abandonment.” He said that he supported the American System because it provided the poor with employment and allowed them to purchase foreign luxuries usually beyond their reach. He acknowledged the consistent complaints of South Carolina because it affected foreign imports, but asked them to put the good of the country first. He wanted the country to come together on neutral ground. According to Clay, abandoning the American System may benefit the South but certainly put other sections of the country into ruin so everyone should continue to support the American System.⁶³

Clay’s fight against the Tariff of 1832 demonstrated his desire for moderate politics to preserve the country’s economic interests. A bill passing through the Senate that year caught the attention of many politicians, especially Clay as he was afraid the bill was going to overstep its bounds by being too progressive and endangering his American System. His goal was to restore higher levies on wool and cotton bagging which would help Kentucky’s economy and protect American goods. Suppressing his frustration Clay voted against the bill, but the bill passed the Senate. Clay felt the tariff was good since

⁶² Harrison and Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky*, 126-133.

⁶³ Swain, *Life and Speeches of Henry Clay Vol. II.*, 59, 62, 67.

textiles would now sell at a higher rate; however, he believed imports on sugar, iron, glass, and cotton bagging were too low.⁶⁴

Henry Clay made a few political enemies due to his aggressive stance protecting American markets. Clay took particular care in aiding Kentucky. Southerners, specifically South Carolinian John C. Calhoun, took offense at Clay's American System, claiming that it would injure the southern markets. Calhoun's animosity towards Clay's economic plan persuaded him to abandon his nationalistic views and cling to states' rights. He drafted a document, "The Exposition and the Protest," which argued against Clay's brand of nationalism. He claimed an injured state should have the right to nullify federal legislation it decided was unconstitutional. This document had a secessionist undertone. Clay believed Calhoun's idea of nullification to be dangerous and ridiculous because he did not feel that one state had the right to block legislation that benefited the majority. Clay argued national law must be superior to state law. Because of this belief Clay avoided Calhoun's reactionary views as they were detrimental to the Bluegrass State's economic interests.⁶⁵

In the time leading up to the Nullification Crisis, Calhoun took careful steps to clarify and publicize his position. Believing that he was protecting the South, Calhoun and his supporters voted down the Woolens Bill of 1827. He wrote, anonymously, the "Exposition of 1828" which argued that the tariff of 1828 was unconstitutional because it promoted manufacturing over commerce as well as agriculture which, specifically cotton, was the primary economic activity for South Carolina, Calhoun's home state. Calhoun

⁶⁴ Hidler and Hidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, 146-149.

⁶⁵ Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System* 63-71.

supported Andrew Jackson's bid for president in hopes he would tone down the tariff, but this was not the case.⁶⁶

In 1831 Calhoun drafted his "Fort Hill" address restating the doctrine of interposition. His views were based on state sovereignty and the ability for a state to determine the validity of national legislation. Clay differed from Calhoun because he believed in the supremacy of nationalism first. Calhoun believed the tariff abused the South and as such it should be deemed unconstitutional. His views frustrated protectionists who supported the tariff. Kentucky supporters of protectionism responded. Articles published in newspapers such as the *Weekly Register* in Lexington supported Clay's argument providing information concerning industry, public policy, and commerce. State legislatures, such as Kentucky and Louisiana, passed resolutions to cultivate domestic trade and support protective tariffs.⁶⁷

The state of Kentucky elected Clay as a National Republican to the United States Senate on November 10th, 1831, to fill a vacancy providing him with another opportunity to nationally endorse his American System. He provided an explanation for his revision of the American System evaluating the status of public debt so that he would cancel the tariff on goods not in competition with American products. Trying to accommodate the South, Clay hoped this compromise would appease its concerns while preserving the protection of American markets. His goal was not to gain a large surplus from the tariff but to convince the Treasury to transfer the money from public-land sales to states to begin internal improvements. However, this did not mollify southerners whose argument

⁶⁶ Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System*, 67-68.

⁶⁷ Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System*, 67-72.

was that the tariff's impact was detrimental to their economy rather than a blessing.⁶⁸

Clay's attempt at compromise proved his commitment to the nation. He was willing to change policy to appease other sections.

Anti-protectionist feelings became intense over the summer of 1832, particularly in South Carolina. In December, South Carolina called a convention and adopted an ordinance to nullify the tariff and declare it unconstitutional. South Carolinians set up barriers to enforce their new rule. South Carolina threatened to withhold its state officers if the government did not acknowledge and respect nullification which could lead to secession from the Union.⁶⁹

President Jackson reacted quickly to the threat by drafting a proclamation to South Carolina. On December 11th, 1832, Jackson stated that the "Union was formed for the benefit of all. It was produced by mutual sacrifices of interests and opinions." The document rejected a state's right to nullify a national decree or to secede from the Union. Andrew Jackson warned South Carolina against leaving the Union because "disunion by armed force is treason." While Clay did not care for Jackson's proclamation, he was aware of the dangers of states' rights rhetoric like South Carolina's nullification. Some protectionists, including many of Clay's supporters, agreed with the president's proclamation and were encouraged when he stood up to South Carolina. The crisis planted seeds of dissension and animosity between different regions of the country.⁷⁰

Out of the debates with Jackson and his supporters over the national bank, the Whig party emerged. The Whig party existed for reasons other than showing opposition

⁶⁸ Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System*, 71-76.

⁶⁹ Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System*, 71-76.

⁷⁰ Andrew Jackson, *Proclamation of Andrew Jackson President of the United States, to People of South Carolina, December 10, 1832* (Harrisburg: Singerly and Myers, State Printers, 1864), 11, 19.

to Jackson. Although there were different sections and remnants of the National Republican Party, they were able to develop a cohesive political philosophy. The party provided a political home for people with different beliefs, including supporters of the tariffs, southern planters, and even northern abolitionists. Whigs fundamentally agreed that citizens should be educated to make informed decisions and that the government should promote economic growth along with national development. The best way to do this was through internal improvements and protecting the economy, in similar fashion to Clay's American System, and was just as important as promoting republicanism.⁷¹

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 proved to be a defining moment in Henry Clay's political career. He understood that giving a person time to process thoughts would allow emotions to settle and reason to triumph. Clay objected to Maine's admission as a free state, but, before casting his vote, he wanted to know the fate of Missouri because he believed it was unfair to place restrictions on Missouri and not Maine. With Clay's suggestion of linking the two states' admission, southerners in the Senate began insisting on the joint admission of Missouri and Maine. Clay assembled a thirteen member committee that was to report a resolution to the House. This was an unsatisfactory condition and was rejected. Clay reintroduced the bill in the House the next day to allow members who had been away a chance to vote. The southern-controlled Senate acted as though Missouri was already admitted, while the House did not. On behalf of Missouri, Clay took the floor again and convinced the House to discuss the resolution. Missouri's votes did not make a difference. An Illinois senator with southern sympathies, Jesse Thomas, came up with a plan. Thomas believed that the 36° 30' line should be the northern border of slavery, excluding Missouri, for the remainder of the

⁷¹ Hidler and Hidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, 313-316.

Louisiana Purchase. This could be considered the South's concession; the North just had to admit Missouri as a state. On February 22nd, 1820, Clay moved to have a joint committee of House and Senate members called to make the final decision for Missouri's fate. The motion passed. This was Clay's first great compromise. Linking the admission of the two states initiated the compromise by convincing the sections to work together. Clay believed in the importance of the Union, and that the failure of the compromise would endanger the Union.⁷²

During the winter of 1816 Clay found a specific bill intriguing because it promoted the colonization of freed slaves who would be able to use the money from the bill to implement a different kind of national improvement. The general thought was to fund gradual emancipation, which Clay thought would convince slaveholders to extirpate their peculiar institution. He hoped this bill would protect freed slaves from mistreatment and allow a transition out of a slaveholding society. Clay sought to find a compromise that would appeal to other moderates, even though he did not believe that the federal government had the constitutional authority to interfere with slavery in states. He believed Congress had the right to abolish slavery in Washington, D.C., along with other federal territories. But any type of extremism on slavery concerned Henry Clay. When Calhoun attempted to have the Senate automatically table petitions requesting abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, it alarmed Clay. It was also Calhoun's plan to have the post office stop delivering abolitionist material to the South. Clay believed both of these extreme measures to be unconstitutional. Actions like these provided a sharp contrast to sectional preferences. It was these differences Clay feared because he believed

⁷² Robert Pierce Forbes, *The Missouri Compromise and its Aftermath: Slavery & the Meaning of America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007), 69-120.

they could slice the Union into sections. Kentucky fell under the influence of Clay's support of this organization and, in 1829, established their own Colonization Society as a branch of the national body. As of 1832, Kentucky had thirty-one colonization societies. Under Clay's influence the society did not free slaves, it only assisted those already free who were willing to leave the country. Even though there was a group attempting to help free blacks, the number of slaves in the state dramatically increased.⁷³

As the Whig party prepared for the election of 1840, Clay hoped for the nomination. The Kentucky legislature recommended Clay for president in 1838 which he believed to be too early. Nevertheless, he started tempering his views on important matters such as the national bank and internal improvements, but Clay had difficulty handling the slavery issue. Calhoun raised some questions for Clay during the Twenty-fifth Congress over this subject. Calhoun had introduced six resolutions in the Senate in December 1837 and he viewed the Union as a compact of sovereign states, where the states have absolute control over internal affairs. This was a way for Calhoun to protect slavery from the federal government. He also claimed that blocking Texas annexation was unfair to the South and unconstitutional if done for anti-slavery reasons. After Calhoun forced Clay's hand in stating his stance on slavery, Clay countered him, which then erupted into an intense political fight in the Senate.⁷⁴ Clay believed that Calhoun only changed sides on subjects for political gain and the preservation of slavery. After outbursts and ranting in the Senate, Clay publicly announced that he was finished consorting with Calhoun. Both men gave opinions of each other freely. Clay believed that Calhoun would "die a traitor or a madman," while Calhoun exclaimed, "I don't like

⁷³ Hidler and Hidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, 269-272; Harrison and Klotter, *A New History in Kentucky*, 176.

⁷⁴ Hidler and Hidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, 289-292.

Henry Clay.” Calhoun believed Clay to be “a bad man, an impostor, a creator of wicked schemes,” and he swore he “wouldn’t speak to” him again. Clay believed he had a fighting chance to gain the Whig party nomination of 1840, but there were some unforeseeable circumstances that would prevent this from coming to fruition.⁷⁵

The new Tariff of 1842 aimed to restore taxation rates back to those set in 1833 as reductions had been made over the past nine years. Henry Clay openly supported the Tariff, defending it from potential revisions by other House members. Clay wrote a letter to Fred J. Cope in 1844 attempting to clarify his opinion on the Tariff of 1842 wherein he explained that his opinion remained the same throughout. He did not believe in adjusting the tariff for revenue and argued that the tariff had both benefited the country and operated well. Clay emphatically wrote that “I AM UTTERLY OPPOSED TO ITS REPEAL.” On April 13th, 1844, Henry Clay gave a speech in Raleigh, North Carolina, declaring the Tariff of 1842 to be beneficial to the country. This tariff turned the “balance of foreign trade in our favor.” Clay found the Tariff of 1842 to be significant as it, like his American System, promoted better trade for America.⁷⁶

Ratified into law on July 30th, 1846, the Tariff of 1846, also referred to as the Walker Tariff, advocated moderate protection instead of free trade and remained in effect until 1857. Clay did not find this tariff to be in the best interest of the country. In a letter to Henry White of Lexington, Clay wrote, “I think our true policy is to go for its repeal, and the restoration of the Tariff of 1842, and nothing else than the repeal of the one and the restoration of the other.” In another letter to Albro, Hoyt & Co. in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, Clay expressed his concerns about the Tariff of 1846 because it could bring

⁷⁵ Hidler and Hidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, 293-297.

⁷⁶ Melba Porter Hay, *The Papers of Henry Clay* Vol. X, (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1991), 78, 33.

“great injury to the general business of the country, and ultimately to the revenue of the government.” Clay did not like the notion of the government having a large deficit; he was always looking out for the betterment of the Union.⁷⁷

After his failed bids for the presidency, Clay returned to the Senate. He served another term from March 4th, 1849, until his death in Washington, D.C., on June 29th, 1852. Henry Clay, even at this point, was known as the Great Compromiser because he moderately served his country during controversial times. He pacified sections of the country while attempting to convince them that the Union was overall more important than the needs of individual states. During this time he dealt with the controversy of the expansion of slavery into new territories. In 1846, President Polk had asked for an appropriation of two million dollars, but David Wilmot tried to attach a proviso to it prohibiting slavery into the territory. The proviso did not pass but it created a hot political issue. The decision to admit California as a state as well as the slavery issue as a whole dominated the Senate floor 1849-1850. Once more Clay felt compelled to step in and play an important mediator role to assist his Union.⁷⁸

On January 29th, 1850, Clay addressed Congress in an attempt to preserve the Union through compromise. Clay recognized the importance of state individualism saying, “we have seen this republic of thirteen States swelling into thirty States, and each State exerting her power in all the forms of social improvement.” Clay also understood the risk of losing the nation stating, “shall we see this Union broken up, and the grandest experiment which has ever been made in the annals of man, suddenly arrested by the voice of fanaticism or the torch of discord?” Clay tried to convince Congress of the

⁷⁷ Hay, *The Papers of Henry Clay* Vol. X, 274, 295, 279.

⁷⁸ Hidler and Hidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, 26-53.

severity of this issue stating, “there is but one rock on which the Union may be split, and that to avoid that fatal shipwreck, we shall require all the energies, all the nerve, all the moral courage, all the prudence, all that spirit of conciliation and compromise, which carried us through the war of 76’ and established the constitution of 87’.”⁷⁹

Clay proposed a series of resolutions which he hoped would reconcile northern and southern interests. First, Clay recommended California’s admission to the Union without Congressional action concerning slavery. Next, Clay proposed the establishment of a territorial government for the remaining portion acquired from Mexico, again, without the discussion of slavery. Clay advocated defining the boundaries for Texas and the federal government assuming the state’s debts. Next, Clay recommended the District of Columbia abolish the slave trade. The South would gain a more effective fugitive slave law and Congress would have no power over the domestic slave trade. Henry Clay ardently pleaded with his peers to set aside sectional differences and exercise moderation and devotion to the Union. After a dispute from Calhoun, the bill did not pass, but Henry Clay worked tirelessly to later pass each individual section.⁸⁰

The Compromise of 1850 was Henry Clay’s last attempt to save his beloved Union. Clay believed that the sovereign states would benefit from the partnership of the Union and must also bear the burden of the other states. “Let us not deceive ourselves. We must compromise the controversy by amicable arrangements...It is conciliation and compromise which have brought this Union together, and must continue to knit it together. In this spirit the Union will remain the proudest monument which man has ever erected, and our country attain a pitch of prosperity which has never been equalled [*sic*]

⁷⁹ Thomas Ritchie, "From the Richmond (Va.) enquirer of Sept. 10th, 1852." *Richmond*, 1852. <http://babel.hathitrust.org>, 5.

⁸⁰ Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War*, 241-265.

in the world.” Clay favored compromise to preserve the Union, an approach later used by Kentucky during the secession crisis.⁸¹

Henry Clay proved to be a moderate politician primarily focused on the Union and employed a political strategy of compromise for its betterment. He found success utilizing this political strategy both in the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850 as well as to make the American System palatable to the nation. Clay’s moderate politics led to a feeling and belief of Unionism during the secession crisis. The general definition of a Unionist, according to Daniel W. Crofts, was the group “who opposed secession.” Moderates or Unionists were willing to be flexible and compromise as long as they could keep the particular institution that was important to them. Although there were different types of Unionists during the secession crisis they were willing to remain in the Union as long as possible in order to preserve their way of life and economic viability. Because of Henry Clay, many in Kentucky believed self-preservation depended on staying within the Union and would later employ Clay’s political strategy of compromise to achieve that goal.

⁸¹ Hidler and Hidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American*, 26-53; Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War*, 241-265; Ritchie, "From the Richmond (Va.) enquirer of Sept. 10th, 1852." 6.

CHAPTER IV

AN UNCOMMITTED STATE AFFECTED BY SECESSION

The state of Kentucky was at a crossroads. Abraham Lincoln treated Kentucky carefully in 1861 because he recognized the state's importance and position. Kentucky's leaders were split over whether to remain loyal to the Union or to secede. Some leaders were in favor of the Union because they believed staying was the best way to protect their economic interests. To secede meant to enter into an unstable new nation built on the Deep South's form of slavery. Kentucky's decision was a matter of such importance to Abraham Lincoln that he wrote to a friend, stating, "I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game."⁸² Lincoln knew that pushing Kentucky would be a poor political move and would cost him greatly.

In the antebellum South, slavery promoted a specific set of political values and practices. Kentucky exhibited these values in 1849 when the legislature passed a law that affirmed the "right of property is before and higher than any constitutional sanction." The specific property mentioned refers to slaves. Kentuckians sided with the party that was going to help their whole economy prosper.

⁸² Abraham Lincoln to Orville H. Browning, 22 September 1861 Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

Kentucky had three major political parties during the first half of the nineteenth century, the Whigs, the Know-Nothings, and the Democrats. The Democrats had the most influence during the 1850s. The Whig Party disappeared in 1854 due to its inability to address the issues of slavery and nativism. The Republican Party, representing new northern opposition, eventually replaced the northern Whigs. Although the Republican Party was known in the South, it did not have a strong presence in Kentucky because of its adamant opposition to slavery's expansion and denigration of the practice of slaveholding in general. For Kentucky the deciding issue was which candidate and party would take care of its economy in 1860.⁸³

The Whig party was the dominant political force from 1832 to 1851. Henry Clay's efforts to promote nationalism during the Compromise of 1850 benefited the Whig party's political power. Even later, with the collapse of the Whig party as a national political power, Whig ideology continued to be strong within the state of Kentucky. Due to the force of nativism and the strong antislavery sentiments of the northern Whigs, the majority of the party split and aligned with the Know-Nothings.⁸⁴

By the mid-1850s, the Whig party lost control of political power in Kentucky due to a division between the northern and southern wings over slavery. Northern Whigs were deemed too antislavery in the eyes of the southern Whigs. This division allowed for a new political party, the Know-Nothings, to emerge in Kentucky. The Know-Nothings

⁸³ Kentucky law quoted from Victor B. Howard, *Evangelical War against Slavery and Caste* (Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania: Susquehanna University, 1996), 46. Kenneth S. Greenburg, *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1985), vii.

⁸⁴ Lowell H. Harrison, *The Civil War in Kentucky* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky, 1975), 4; Ralph A. Wooster, *The Secession Conventions of the South* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 1962), 208.

claimed to be the party of the American-born Protestant working man. The Know-Nothings were fearful of immigrants, specifically the Democratic-leaning Roman Catholic Irishmen, whom they believed were going to undermine American society.⁸⁵

Like the Whigs before them, the Know-Nothings had a difficult time maintaining their popularity because of the slavery issue. They were forced to decide on slavery's expansion, but the northern and southern divisions of the party could not agree: the southern members approved the Missouri Compromise while the northerners disapproved of it. The Democrats put the Know-Nothings under extreme pressure by equating the Know-Nothing Party with abolitionism and free-soil ideology. In 1856 the Know-Nothings ran their only presidential candidate, Millard Fillmore, with vice-presidential candidate Andrew Jackson Donelson. They intended to capture votes from both old Whigs and new Know-Nothings; however, the Know-Nothing Party's attempt failed and resulted in its demise. Many northern ex-Whigs joined the Republican Party. Ex-Whigs who did not align with Republicans joined the Constitutional Unionist Party. By the 1860 presidential election, the Know-Nothings ceased to exist in Kentucky, and thus no formal opposition party existed in Kentucky in 1859-1860.⁸⁶

Democrats had a considerable following in Kentucky because their platforms tended to be pro-southern. However the Democrats were not a majority party because Kentucky generally held to Clay's American System. The Democrats triumphed over the Know-Nothing Party with James Buchanan who received fifty-six percent of Kentucky's popular vote as well as the electoral votes in the 1856 election. The Democrats succeeded

⁸⁵ William J. Cooper, Jr., *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 231-247.

⁸⁶ Cooper, Jr., *Liberty and Slavery*, 231-247.

by declaring that the Republicans were radically opposed to both slavery's expansion and the particular institution in general. Democrats demanded strict observation of the Fugitive Slave Law. They also believed the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) was just in its repeal of the Missouri Compromise of 1820, and they also defended the doctrine of popular sovereignty.⁸⁷

Southerners felt that the spread of slavery was threatened by the emergence of the Republican Party and its goals. The Republicans aligned themselves with the Wilmot Proviso and its goal of stopping the expansion of slavery. During the 1850s, the Republicans opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, seeing it as a means for planters to reinstate the practice locally overriding control from the federal government. Republicans competed with the Democrats for free states in 1856, but lost the election; nonetheless, they won all but five of the northern states. Southerners feared Republicans would soon sweep all the states of the North and win the presidency. Southerners believed that once Republicans had control of the federal government, they would override state laws and customs, especially and particularly in regard to slaveholding.⁸⁸

The results of the 1860 presidential election revealed how Kentuckians felt about potential candidates and platforms of Abraham Lincoln, Steven Douglas, John C. Breckinridge, and John Bell. In the 1860 presidential election, Lincoln received only 1,364 popular votes from Kentucky out of the 146,216 cast. Kentucky voters disagreed with Lincoln's Republican platform of restricting slavery to states where it currently

⁸⁷ James L. Huston, *Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2003), 190-200.

⁸⁸ Cooper Jr., *Liberty and Slavery*, 255-258.

existed and preventing expansion.⁸⁹ The Republican Party disagreed with the re-opening of the African Slave Trade. They viewed it as “a crime against humanity and a burning shame to our country and age.” The Republican goal was to permanently dispose of the slave trade. These were not the principles to win the state of Kentucky as it impacted the wallets of many residents who participated in the slave trade.⁹⁰

Northern Democratic candidate, Stephen Douglas, took the third place position in Kentucky with 25,651 votes. Douglas and Breckinridge, both Democrats, agreed on the majority of the party's platform however they were divided on the issue of slavery. Breckinridge favored a territorial slave code which would grant the constitutional right to slave owners to hold slaves in territories whereas Douglas preferred popular sovereignty which would allow territories to decide based on popular vote. Ultimately, the Democratic Party resolved to abide by the Supreme Court decision concerning constitutional law.⁹¹

John Bell carried a presence in Kentucky with 66,058 votes, 12,915 votes over Breckinridge. The Constitutional Union Party believed it should protect the principles of public liberty and national safety from every enemy local or foreign. The Unionists wanted domestic peace and liberty for everyone. Unlike the Republicans and Democrats of the time, the Constitutional Unionists avoided taking a direct position on slavery. Breckinridge's National Democratic Platform promoted the belief that U.S. citizens should be allowed to settle with their property in a territory without government

⁸⁹ J. F. Cleveland, *The Tribune Almanac and Political Register for 1861*. (New York: The Tribune Association, 1861), 52;30;31.

⁹⁰ National Republican Convention Platform flier. Chicago: Illinois Press and Tribune Office, May 17, 1860. Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum.

⁹¹ Cleveland, *The Tribune Almanac and Political Register for 1861*. 30, 31, 52; Henry Wilson, “Territorial Slave Code,” (Washington DC: Buell & Blanchard printers, 1860), 8.

impeding their rights. Also, when those territories became states, the citizens would be allowed to retain their slaves, “whether its Constitution prohibits or recognizes the institution of Slavery.” Breckinridge aligned with his party’s platform, believing there should be enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law and governmental protection of slaveholders.⁹²

The different geographical sections of Kentucky voted for specific candidates. The Constitutional Unionist party carried the most votes in the sections of dominant slaveholding and commercial interests, such as tobacco-heavy central Kentucky, near the Cumberland Valley. The majority of the northern border of Kentucky voted for Bell because of its dependence on northern businesses. The eastern mountainous region of Kentucky, rich in coal, salt, and timber, cast its votes for Breckinridge because they identified with the states’ rights issues. This group proved to be deeply devoted to the Union later. Kentucky was divided by the economic interests of the North and the political interests of the South.⁹³

Why did the majority of Kentucky side with John Bell over one of their own, John C. Breckinridge? Republican Senator Chandler of Michigan answered that question in a speech published in the *National Republican* newspaper. He responded to the claims of Breckinridge’s friends that Breckinridge was a man for the Union. Chandler stated that “in the State of Kentucky that the contest was, who was the soundest upon the Union question: who would stand by the Union the longest; who was prepared to shed his blood for it if need be?” Senator Chandler went on to discredit Breckinridge and proclaim that

⁹² Cleveland, *The Tribune Almanac and Political Register for 1861*. 31-34, 52.

⁹³ Edward Smith, *The Borderland in the Civil War* (New York: Freeport Books for Libraries, 1969), 64-65; Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 22.

he could not speak for Kentucky; Breckinridge could not claim that Kentucky had intentions of leaving the Union as long as she was guaranteed her rights by the Union. Kentuckians were looking for a candidate that would preserve their comfortable life. Bell was not going to take away slavery and wanted to keep the Union intact. Historians were not surprised by Kentucky's actions because the state was influenced by the moderate compromising politics of Henry Clay. Kentuckians tended to vote for the candidate that would promote Kentucky's interests.⁹⁴

Ultimately the 1860 national election went to the Republicans. Lincoln received 180 electoral votes out of 303 with almost forty percent of the popular vote. Bell received fewer than thirteen percent of the popular vote which produced only thirty nine electoral votes. Lincoln managed to win the election without the support of the South, including Kentucky which would later become a state of great significance to Lincoln as the Secession Crisis began.

On December 20th, 1860, the secessionist convention of South Carolina signed the petition to withdraw from the Union. After this act, South Carolina sent out delegates to persuade others to join her crusade. Following the example of South Carolina, six more states seceded from the Union before Lincoln's inauguration. Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas all left the Union between January and February

⁹⁴ *National Republican*, 25 March 1861; Thomas C. Mackey, "Not a Pariah, but a Keystone: Kentucky and Secession," in Kent T. Dollar, Larry H. Whiteaker, and W. Calvin Dickinson, eds., *Sister States Enemy States: The Civil War in Kentucky and Tennessee* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2009), 33-34.

of 1861. These states then turned their attention to the border states, specifically the fertile grounds of Kentucky.⁹⁵

Pro-secessionists and Unionists intensely debated each other in Kentucky between December 1860 and May 1861. Kentuckians from both parties as well as outsiders leveraged multiple forms of media to influence citizens. Kentuckians employed Clay's politically moderate temperament of compromise instead of aligning with either side which effectively divided the state.

Kentuckians, like other southerners in the border states, had a fear of emancipation dating from the 1840s. Kentucky's constitution protected the institution of slavery. The vast majority of Kentuckians did not want that to change, feeling that blacks were inferior and incapable of acting responsibly if freed. Economically it was in Kentucky's interest to maintain slave labor.⁹⁶

An anti-slavery movement had swept through states such as Kentucky, Western Virginia, and Tennessee in the 1820s causing many slaveholders to contemplate setting their bondservants free. This was largely an evangelical movement that lost fervor in the 1830s because of the radical viewpoint it took. Its position was to immediately terminate slavery in the states and condemn the owners, calling the practice a sin. This aggressive position proved to be too extreme for these states and the movement eventually disappeared.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Ralph A. Wooster, *The Secession Conventions of the South* (New Jersey: Princeton University, 1962), 111-121.

⁹⁶ Howard, *Evangelical War against Slavery and Caste*, 34-47.

⁹⁷ Avery Craven, *Coming of the Civil War* (Illinois: University of Chicago, 1966), 118-122.

The election of 1860 is a perfect illustration of lingering devotion to Clayite politics in Kentucky. An overwhelming fear permeated in the South concerning the emancipation of slaves. Kentuckians had specifically taken measures to protect the institution in their constitution. Another evangelical campaign against slavery surged during the 1840s and 50s and proclaimed slavery to be immoral and ruinous to the social framework of Kentucky. While the movement claimed that slavery weakened societal structures, Kentucky continued to maintain significant economic interests in the practice and felt compelled to protect it. Under the new constitution, 1799 in slavery could not be eliminated without the consent of slaveholders.⁹⁸

When the anti-slavery movement again reemerged during the late 1840s and 1850s, northern propaganda aggressively attacked the institution of slavery. Anti-slavery Christians began teaching young children the error of the southern way by word association when learning their ABC's. "A is an Abolitionist, D is the Driver, cold and stern, W is the Whipping post." Abolitionists wanted to spread their way of thinking to northern children in order to encourage them to speak out against slavery to others. Hymns documented abolitionists' tales of poorly treated slaves which became common reading literature. Their goal was to appeal to emotions. Another avenue of spreading abolitionist sentiment was to draw direct distinctions between classes. They portrayed the wealthy planter class negatively asserting they were the people who could afford an education but refused to support public schools. Anti-slavery groups also targeted the concepts of Christianity and morality to gain sympathy for their movement. Pamphlets told of the moral desolation that took place in the South. The abuse of African women by

⁹⁸Howard, *Evangelical War against Slavery and Caste*, 34-47.

evil white masters was prominent and unstoppable with the continuance of slavery. Their goal was to link immorality to slavery and it was achieved.⁹⁹

Kentucky held sympathy for its southern sister states when the particular institution became endangered. In many ways, Kentucky was a southern state interested in preserving the institution of slavery as it made economic sense; however, it would not break up the country by secession just because of Lincoln's election. A man who voiced his concern about secession was J. W. Crockett. Crockett was comfortable with armed neutrality but believed Kentucky needed to remain loyal to the Union. If it came to Kentucky deciding to part, Crockett wanted the state remembered as "the last to shake hands with the Goddess of Liberty." Crockett understood that in times of turmoil cool thinking and discreet action were positive traits. He urged his listeners to "think calmly" as the events emerge "act with patriotism."¹⁰⁰

Influential outsiders and politicians promoted pro-secessionist ideas in Kentucky. In his "Cornerstone Address" Alexander H. Stephens, a former senator from Georgia and Vice President of the Confederate States of America urged the border states, due to their similar institutions, "to join us." He believed that the South held a superior way of life and that southerners needed to be true to their cause. Stephens proclaimed that the "cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition." Stephens believed that the border states could survive and flourish if they formed an alliance with

⁹⁹ Craven, *Coming of the Civil War*, 142-150.

¹⁰⁰ *Louisville Daily Courier*, January 11, 1861.

the deeper South states.¹⁰¹ Advocates of secession from southern states were a tool of secession. In all there were approximately fifty-two men who sought to incite secession. These men were judges, doctors, or lawyers who were known for their speaking skills. The advocates provided a compelling argument asking people to consider the option of secession. The Deep South states sent promoters of their cause to construct a campaign and bombard Kentucky to cultivate secessionist ideals in an attempt to force them to make a decision to secede.¹⁰²

The goal of the secessionist argument was to touch on the topics sensitive to Kentuckians and to persuade them to stick with their southern sister states. Newspapers of the time reflect the mindset of the average Kentuckian. The *Louisville Daily Courier* was a primarily secessionist newspaper which presented its readers with arguments of economics and loyalty to promote secession. In one editorial the author proclaimed that the North built railroads with southern money; the South created wealth but the North grabbed it via taxation. “Give us the purse and you may keep the sword,” the article read; southerners believed this was a frequent northern statement meaning the North only wanted the South for its money. The author believed that the South had the “purse” used against them for some time. He stated that the South had borne the burden except for the North adding “insult to injury”. According to the author, the North was teaching its children to hate the South because of the institution of slavery and the treatment of African Americans. He stated that there “is no longer virtue in forbearance on the part of

¹⁰¹ Alexander H. Stephens, “Cornerstone Address,” March 21, 1861, Jon L. Wakelyn in *Southern Pamphlets on Secession: November 1860-1861* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1996), 402-412.

¹⁰² Edward Conrad Smith, *The Borderland in the Civil War* (New York: Freeport Books for Libraries, 1969), 84-85; Charles B. Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2001), 1-21.

the South.” A separate editorial in August of that year did not blame South Carolina for seceding but applauded the sincerity of her people. The author criticized Kentucky because of the cowardice displayed in refusing to take sides.¹⁰³

Leaders in Kentucky did not agree on how to handle the secession crisis. They were as divided as the people. *The New York Times* wrote an article about John C. Breckinridge speaking at a secessionist barbecue in Madison County, Kentucky. In his speech Breckinridge urged his fellow Kentuckians to resist the laws of the United States with respect to the tariff and war tax, which the government was levying upon citizens. Breckinridge encouraged Kentuckians to support the seceded states by giving them “aid and comfort.”¹⁰⁴ Another influential Kentucky leader, Governor Beriah Magoffin, harbored secessionist sympathies. He felt that secession was legal and believed that coercing seceded states back into the Union was illegal. Magoffin’s solution for Kentucky came January 17th, 1861, when he advocated to the General Assembly that Kentucky should secede from the Union. Magoffin feared that the Republicans were “destructive to [the South's] rightful equality as States.” He believed that Republicans would prove to be “fatal to our stability and security of our whole social organization.” Magoffin thought that they would lead the Union towards disrespecting property, slavery, leading towards abolition. It was Magoffin’s belief that Kentucky would fight for its rights, freedom, and honor with or without the Union.¹⁰⁵

The South proved to be extremely aggressive in its use of propaganda to affect Kentuckians. Northern Unionists were equally capable at messaging its agenda as well.

¹⁰³ *Louisville Daily Courier*, January 17, 1861; *Louisville Daily Courier*, August 30, 1861.

¹⁰⁴ *New York Times* September 11, 1861.

¹⁰⁵ *Journal of the called Session of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort: Kentucky Yeoman Office, 1861), 5-7.

Concerning the argument against secession, other states such as Missouri interjected its opinion. Missouri's Democratic Governor, Claiborne Jackson, believed Missouri had lost as many slaves as the other states combined. Governor Jackson stated in a speech that he "deprecates the action of South Carolina, and says our people would feel more sympathy with the movement had it originated amongst those who; like ourselves, had suffered severe loss by constant annoyance from outsiders." Jackson went on to state that Missouri would hold its position in the Union as long as it was worth the effort of preservation. The Missouri governor denied any state the right of secession as he believed it would ultimately destroy the nation. Jackson continued to urge people to take power from the selfish politicians and hold steadfast to the Union while it desired to be the protector of equal rights. This speech appeared in the newspaper to encourage Kentuckians to remain in the Union.¹⁰⁶

On November 12th, 1860, Leslie Combs, a Unionist supporter from Kentucky, gave a speech which was reported in a newspaper article, declaring that "to stand by the Union is the only hope of preservation." He believed "under the Federal Constitution the state possesses no right either to secede from the Union or to nullify a law of Congress."¹⁰⁷ Another outspoken Kentucky citizen, Captain James Jackson of Christian County, gave a powerful speech for the "American Union" and he was completely "opposed to the disruption" of the government. His belief was that the border states lost a considerable amount of freedom but endured wrong with patience. Jackson was another individual who openly displayed his disgust for the actions of South Carolina. He did not

¹⁰⁶ *Louisville Daily Courier*, January 4, 1861.

¹⁰⁷ Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989), 106; Leslie Combs, November 12, 1860, Abraham Lincoln Papers Library of Congress.

believe South Carolina had given a true reason for its actions. Captain Jackson did not believe secession was an answer.¹⁰⁸

Robert J. Breckinridge wrote a pamphlet in January of 1861 giving a religious argument against secession. He disputed claims that Kentucky shared a common interest with the slave states. Breckinridge felt the Upper South, including Kentucky, did not share the economic system of the cotton states. He thought Kentucky should remain loyal to the Union and that slavery should not be a factor in secession. He claimed there were not enough slaves to cause concern and that Kentucky could do what they wanted with slaves “without being obliged, by reason of it, to resort to any desperate expedient, in any direction.” Breckinridge believed that in order to save the Union the slavery issue must be extinguished. John Bell advocated that Kentucky remain in the Union and fight “under the stars and stripes” for the Union. He categorized nullifiers as traitors and harshly criticized South Carolina for its actions of secession.¹⁰⁹

Senator John J. Crittenden spoke numerous times about the evils of a war for abolition. Crittenden wrote to his friend, Mr. Sedgwick of New York, in 1861 expressing his distaste of the current political situation. Crittenden refused to carry on a war to free slaves. Crittenden went on to say that “I must leave the task of prosecuting an abolition war against their own race for the liberation of the slaves held by them under all the sanction of constitution and law.” With these arguments the Unionists writers hoped to

¹⁰⁸ *Louisville Daily Courier*, January 11, 1861.

¹⁰⁹ Robert J. Breckinridge, “Discourse Delivered on the Day of National Humiliation, January 4, 1861, at Lexington, Kentucky,” in *Southern Pamphlets on Secession*, November 1860-April 1861, edited by Jon L. Wakelyn, 247-261; *Louisville Daily Courier*, January 11, 1861.

convince border states to switch their allegiance. In Kentucky, along with Maryland and Delaware, state legislatures refused to call state conventions to discuss secession.¹¹⁰

The Secessionists saw strategic value in winning Kentucky over to the South. They argued that the state would benefit more in a southern government than remaining in the Union. Leaders such as Magoffin and Breckinridge felt that Kentucky also fundamentally did not have strong ties to the North and, if push came to shove, Kentuckians would fight for “self first, State second, and Union last.”¹¹¹

Pro-Unionists proposed the idea that secessionists were traitors. Pro-Unionists also stated that Kentucky could preserve their use of slavery in the state while remaining in the Union. Finally, leaders like Leslie Combs and Captain James Jackson believed that states simply did not have the right to secede.

Despite the debates between Secessionists and Unionists, by April 1861, Kentucky still had not chosen a side. Instead Kentucky held a convention to create another solution adhering to their tradition of political neutrality. However, Kentucky had to contend with an internal debate from the now-prominent activist group, the Knights of the Golden Circle.

George Bickley and a small group of followers founded The Knights of the Golden Circle on July 4th, 1854, in Lexington, Kentucky, with the goals of secession and protection of slave labor. This organization planned to lead the world's production of

¹¹⁰ John Townsend, *The Doom of Slavery in the Union: It's Safety Out of It* (Charleston: South Carolina, 1860), 22. William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Volume II Secessionist Triumph 1854-1861* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007), 501-503.

¹¹¹ U.S. Department of War, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 1861-1865*, 70 vols. In 128pts. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), ser, 1 vol. 45, pt. 2, pp. 93-94.

cotton, tobacco, rice, sugar, and coffee with the help of slave labor. The Golden Circle hoped to establish an empire drawn by a 1,200 mile radius circle centering on Havana. This empire would include Maryland, Kentucky, southern Missouri, portions of Kansas, and Texas as well as parts of Old Mexico, Central America, South America, and the West Indies. The Knights of the Golden Circle hoped that by annexing other slave territories for the United States it would strengthen the South's position in the Union. Ultimately the group was deemed too extreme by Kentucky's legislature. In order for the state to be perceived as moderate, it had to disassociate itself from the Secessionist principles of the Knights of the Golden Circle.¹¹²

Unionists feared for the safety of the Union instead of ensuring the safety of slavery. Unionism existed in the Upper South in states like Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Delaware, Missouri, and Maryland. From these states three distinct types of Unionists emerged; absolute or unconditional, anticoercionist or extended ultimatumist, and fast ultimatumist. These groups had differing opinions on how to repair the Union but the majority of Unionists generally shared five common beliefs. First, the economic interests of the Upper South would significantly suffer if they were to join the CSA due to the differing forms of slavery. Second, Unionists believed that Secessionists used fear mongering to generate alarm and encourage others to join their cause. Third, most Unionists believed secession to not be realistic. Fourth, southern misunderstanding of northern intentions brought them to the impending conflict. Lastly,

¹¹² Ollinger Crenshaw, "The Knights of the Golden Circle: The Career of George Bickley" *The American Historical Review*, 47 (Oct., 1941): 38-42; Florence L. Grayston, "Lambdin P. Milligan—A Knight of the Golden" *Indiana Magazine of History* 43 (December 1947): 383; C. A. Bridges, "The Knights of the Golden Circle: A Filibustering Fantasy," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 44 (Jan., 1941): 287-291.

they considered the Republican Party the only instrument that could correct the misunderstanding and redirect the nation away from war.¹¹³

Each of the groups had conditions for remaining in the Union. Anticoercionists would stay with the Union unless the North attempted to wage war on the South. This group believed that the Upper South would secede if or when the North chose to deploy troops against the seceded states. Extended ultimatumists would remain in the Union until all hope and reasoning for a resolution was gone. Many Virginians fell under this section. Extended ultimatumists were specifically concerned with the constitutional claim of slaveholders expanding their peculiar institution into a few of the federal territories. If the Union violated slaveholder's intentions to expand slavery, then the states in the lower South would leave the Union. The strength of conditional Unionist sentiment was able to delay Virginia in her decision for over five months after Lincoln's election. Virginia remained in the Union for two months after the formation of the Confederate States of America. The conditional Unionists of Virginia remained until they were provoked by the president's actions against the seceded states.¹¹⁴

Men like Dr. Richard Eppes, a slave-holding conditional Unionist of Virginia, would rather remain in an old Union than venture into a new Confederacy. Dr. Eppes described himself as "a moderate man in my views, preferring the old Confederacy to a new if the South can have her rights guaranteed[,] but if not feeling that our only hope must be in another Union as a last resort." His statement reflected the belief of most Virginia conditional Unionists during that time. Several conditional Unionists became

¹¹³ Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, 104-106.

¹¹⁴ Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989), 105.

reluctant secessionists in March because of the failed attempt to secure a sectional compromise on slavery at a Washington Peace Conference. The last hope of Virginia's alliance with the Union vanished after the incident with Fort Sumter in April and Lincoln's call for troops. A man met Eppes at his door asking for his signature on the ordinance of secession for Virginia. Eppes signed the document stating that he had "lost all hopes of our Union with the Northern States since President Lincoln has adopted the policy of coercion of the seceded states." Virginia seceded April 17th, 1861. This was significant to Kentucky because, according to the 1860s census, the highest number of emigrants in Kentucky came from Virginia.¹¹⁵

Conditional Unionists existed in the border slave states due to President Lincoln's influence. Lincoln did not want to be perceived as overly aggressive on slavery as it would alienate the slaveholders causing them to side with their brethren of the Deep South. If leadership remained temperate and patient, as Clay taught, rational thinking would win out. Lincoln also understood the strategic importance of Kentucky in case of war. The Ohio River is the northern border which would allow for travel and transport of supplies or troops in the event of war. Kentucky was also fertile with supplies that would be useful. The uncommitted border state of Kentucky proved to be of critical importance to Lincoln's overall strategy and, due in part to her ambivalent politics surrounding the Union and the Confederacy, merited careful consideration from the President.

Governor Beriah Magoffin called a special session of the Kentucky House of Representatives on May 6th, 1861, to discuss Kentucky's position on secession. "Let us

¹¹⁵ Shearer Davis Bowman, "Conditional Unionism and Slavery in Virginia, 1860-1861: The Case of Dr. Richard Eppes," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 96 (Jan., 1988): 31-48; U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860*. Washington, D.C., 1860, 185.

not attempt to employ our official power thus acquired to control this mighty question,” Magoffin stated in his address. “Rather let us provide a legal and orderly mode for a full, deliberate, and final disposition, by the people themselves, of their own destinies.”¹¹⁶

The goal of the legislature was to allow for the people to decide their own fate, instead of making decisions for Kentucky citizens. On the second day of this session, several representatives brought forth petitions and pleas of women from their counties who were “praying that Kentucky maintain inviolate and armed neutrality.”¹¹⁷ Nine out of 120 counties had women asking for Kentucky to continue with protected neutrality. The secession also dealt with other matters, such as the House needing to be privy to the Governor’s correspondence with the government of the Confederate States of America and Governor Magoffin obtaining arms for Kentucky.¹¹⁸

A resolution of neutrality passed in the House reading “The General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky have asserted strict neutrality to be the position desirable for the state to occupy in the present contest between the Federal Government and the seceding States; therefore the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky asserts that this position will be maintained with sincerity and honor by the State; that the parties engaged in the present fratricidal war should respect

¹¹⁶ *Journal of the called Session of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort: Kentucky Yeoman Office, 1861), 7; 24-25.

¹¹⁷ *Journal of the called Session of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort: Kentucky Yeoman Office, 1861), 7; 24-25.

¹¹⁸ *Journal of the called Session of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort: Kentucky Yeoman Office, 1861), 7; 24-25.

this neutrality, and know that Kentucky cannot with honor to herself submit to armed forces hostile to the neutrality invading her soil.”¹¹⁹

It took until Tuesday, May 21st, 1861, for Mr. Nathaniel Wolfe to request that it be amended with an investigation into the Knights of the Golden Circle seeking the following: the organization’s purpose, details on the members, clarification if the members were under contract to oppose the US government, identification of any members within the legislative body, and finally full disclosure from the Governor of Kentucky regarding any secret correspondence he has had especially with representatives from seceded states. The committee must know if the Governor had promised Kentuckians to fight for the CSA or allow Confederate troops to enter Kentucky. The amendment passed with a large majority favoring neutrality and seeing the value of keeping the Governor in check.¹²⁰

The decision passed on May 16th, 1861, for the state of Kentucky to not secede and rather to remain strictly neutral. The state realized its economic interests would benefit the most remaining uncommitted to either side and speeches of Kentucky’s leaders at the time reflect this opinion. The presence of armed forces from either the Union or the Confederacy would be viewed as an invasion.

It is clear that Kentucky came to the vote for neutrality because it was a divided state. Despite political leaders from both sides, the state’s economic interests forced the state to not participate in the struggle with which the rest of the country was involved. It

¹¹⁹ *Journal of the called Session of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort: Kentucky Yeoman Office, 1861), 94.

¹²⁰ *Journal of the called Session of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort: Kentucky Yeoman Office, 1861), 137-140.

seems that “no policy could have accorded more closely with the mixed feelings engendered by Kentucky’s Southern heritage and the legacy of Henry Clay.”¹²¹

Neutrality was also advantageous for Kentuckians because it allowed them to be safe and stay out of the conflict while pursuing their own interests. In the resolution of neutrality Kentucky asked to defend its “right of friendly intercourse and trade with both sections” not allowing either government to possess authority over its possessions or property within Kentucky borders.¹²²

Neutrality was beneficial for Kentucky’s economy because of its location. The Louisville and Nashville railroads were critical in maintaining their intersectional trade. This trade aided in enforcing Kentucky’s neutrality during the spring and early summer. Federal authorities were lenient on Kentucky concerning the trade because they wanted to keep a good relationship. Remaining in the United States allowed the state to trade freely with the northern states and a policy of neutrality prevented the federal government from ceasing trade with the Confederacy which further helped Kentucky’s economy flourish throughout the summer of 1861. Even after Congress banned trade with the Confederacy, Lincoln allowed Kentucky to continue trade with some exceptions. Lincoln delicately handled matters with Kentucky in the hope of swaying the state towards the Union.¹²³

For Kentuckians to take a stand and side with a section during the war they needed to carefully consider their options and decide who would benefit them more. An editorial published in the *Louisville Daily Courier*, a secessionist newspaper, tried to

¹²¹ Russell F. Weigley, *A Great Civil War: A Military and Political History, 1861-1865* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2000), 46-47.

¹²² *Journal of the called Session of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort: Kentucky Yeoman Office, 1861), 94.

¹²³ Chris M. Paine, “Kentucky Will be the Last to Give Up the Union: Kentucky Politics 1844-1861,” (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 1998), 315-316.

persuade Kentucky to side with the southern states with the guarantee of lower tariffs. The author claimed, “the difference to the Southern consumer would be, that the tax would be much less than at the present, while the incidental protection it would give to the manufactures would serve to build up our own cities and contribute to the prosperity of our friends, instead of enriching our enemies.”¹²⁴

After the 1860 election, an argument began in Kentucky to select a side, after the neutrality vote, because many did not believe that neutrality was a sustainable option. A speech published in the *Jeffersonian* newspaper encouraged Kentucky to make a decision. The speaker compared neutrality to “a snake in the grass of rebellion...sooner or later those who handle it will feel its fangs.” The speaker was a Unionist who condemned Kentucky, openly mocking its people to obtain a demonstration of faith toward the Union. He proclaimed that the governor, Governor Magoffin, was hostile to Unionism and favorable to the welfare of Kentucky. An editorial published in the *Louisville Daily Courier* stated that neutrality was “hypocrisy for Kentucky” because it supported the Union by contributing men and money. That author did not believe neutrality could be maintained and that Kentucky needed to be prepared to choose who to aid. Another editorial stated that “If Kentucky has any future before her she will act now, firmly and heroically.” They believed that the revolution was upon them, and they had no time to waste. That editor thought that the South needed to respond in action together. The general consensus of this newspaper was that neutrality was ignoble and had run its

¹²⁴ *Louisville Daily Courier* January 31, 1861.

course. Neutrality was only a temporary avoidance to war, and Kentucky needed to take a stand.¹²⁵

National politics evolved during the Secession Crisis from December 1860 to June 1861. Kentucky voted against secession when it threatened its industries; however political loyalties within the state remained divided. Strong-minded Kentuckians and political leaders frequently pointed out the regional and political reasons to side with either the Union or the Confederacy. Regardless Kentucky adhered to Clay's political philosophy of moderation, opting to resist aligning with either side while still enjoying the fruits of the Union industries and the benefits of slave trading in the Confederacy. Kentucky continued to benefit economically by riding the thin line between the Union and the Confederacy.

¹²⁵ *Jeffersonian*, August 29, 1861; *Louisville Daily Courier*, August 31, 1861; *Louisville Daily Courier*, January 25, 1861; *Louisville Daily Courier*, August 30, 1861.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THE INVASION OF KENTUCKY

During the Secession Crisis, Kentucky remained uniquely unaligned to either the Union or the Confederacy despite significant pressure from both sides. The state realized financial benefits by remaining politically neutral and this position evolved from multiple events from the state's history. After giving an account of these events that eventually forced Kentucky to select a side there will be a summary of what was discussed during this thesis within each chapter as well as what other historians believe about Kentucky's choice.

Even after the powerful attempts at persuasion from both Confederate and Unionist delegates, the Kentucky government remained moderate and neutral in the developing conflict between the North and South. Kentuckians maintained a lucrative trade policy between both sides, proving that they favored their own economic interests over nationalism. This was the primary reason that Kentucky favored neutrality for as long as possible. Kentucky's neutrality remained intact until the Confederate invasion by General Polk from Tennessee in September 1861 forced Kentucky to align with the Union to protect its stronger economic interests.

General Leonidas Polk broke Kentucky neutrality with the Confederate forces on September 3rd when they entered the state first. Kentucky's legislature proclaimed the Confederates to be invaders. Polk sent General Gideon J. Pillow to seize Columbus, Kentucky because it was regarded as the "key to the Mississippi River." At the news of the Confederate invasion, the Kentucky legislature responded by discarding neutrality and declaring full allegiance to the United States. Kentuckians believed their sovereign and neutral position was violated. The state felt threatened by the Confederacy's action and needed to secure the safety of its people. Joining the Union would offer Kentucky economic safety.¹²⁶

Jefferson Davis argued that the Union invaded Kentucky first. He stated, "the federal forces have not only refused to acknowledge her right to be neutral, and have insisted upon making her a party to the war, but have invaded her for the purpose of attack the Confederate States." According to Davis, he received information about the invasion of the Confederacy through Kentucky in September of 1861 and he was outraged at the thought of Kentucky being deceived, unarmed, and unnecessarily secured by the federal forces. He sent the Confederate army into Kentucky by way of Polk to prevent Union occupation of such a venerable state. Jefferson also feared that allowing the Union to settle in Kentucky would give the Union a greater advantage in the war.

If Kentuckians had an undying loyalty to the Union or strong nationalism they would have immediately sided with the Union, not proclaimed neutrality and wait. Kentuckians would not have protested paying the federal government in taxes to help

¹²⁶ Clement Eaton, *A History of The Southern Confederacy*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954), 44; James McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton University, 1982), 154.

with the war. Kentucky would have sent more troops willingly to aid the Union's cause. Kentucky did not have a strong sense of nationalism for the Union which is evident in the numbers of troops they sent to serve. Out of the eligible white males in Kentucky, only twenty-nine percent chose to fight. Seventy-one percent of able men chose not to fight for the Union cause. Lincoln made an attempt to draft Kentuckians two different times during the war. First, the Federal government called for approximately 9,000 troops, with only 421 offering service, while almost 4,000 provided a monetary compensation. Unionist sentiment was obviously not powerful enough to encourage Kentuckians to fight because in 1864 most eligible men completely dodged the draft. Lincoln's second attempt at calling for Kentucky troops in July, asking for about 16,000 men, gained him fewer than 1,500 for actual service. There were about 2,000 substitutes submitted for service to the Union.¹²⁷

Davis seemed to be searching for justification because the Confederacy invaded a neutral state. Enduring the long debate of neutrality, Kentucky remained in the Union because that was the best choice for the state. Kentucky leaders weighed the benefits of joining each side. Kentucky considered the state's local interests instead of siding with southern nationalistic sympathy. Even with strong secessionist arguments and a connection due to the southern slave trade, in the end, the South invaded a neutral Kentucky forcing them to seek safety and an alliance with the Union.¹²⁸

Kentucky's unique use of slavery separated them from the southern ideals while keeping the state from aligning completely with the Union. Henry Clay worked tirelessly

¹²⁷ Anne E. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: the Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010), 20.

¹²⁸ Jefferson Davis to the Congress of the Confederate States, Jefferson Davis Papers, November 18th 1861, 412-419.

not only for Kentucky but also the Union. His creation of the American System financially aided Kentucky along with several other parts of the country. His goal was compromise for the betterment of the Union and he fought many political battles in an attempt to keep the nation whole. Political pressure increased during the Secession Crisis causing Kentucky to become important to military strategy; however Kentucky politics followed Clay's moderate example as long as possible. It is critical to comprehend the long term causes that influenced the reasoning behind Kentucky's decision in order to understand its choice. Kentuckians ultimately sided with the Union because it would protect their economy the best.

Kentucky proved to be of great significance to both the Union and the Confederacy during the Civil War. As stated in chapter two, the state established its unique position based on multiple criteria including the diverse native population that emigrated from across the country, the proximity of the state to both the north and south effectively making it a border state during the Secession Crisis, and the unique form of slavery leveraged in Kentucky that distinguished it from other southern states. Historians such as E. Merton Coulter, Thomas D. Clark, Lowell H. Harrison, and James C. Koltter trace a detailed history of the state's foundation through Census data, slave narratives, and other primary sources like newspapers of the time. After taking shape, the state joined the turbulent political arena of the nation slowly dividing over the institution of slavery.

Chapter three discussed the impact of Henry Clay's political moderation on Kentucky politics. Clay's American System allowed Kentucky to transport goods such as mules, horses, and tobacco more efficiently creating prosperity for the state and expanding its involvement with the slave trade. Clay's role in the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850 demonstrated the value of moderate politics to Kentuckians. Thomas C. Mackey, David S. and Jeanne T. Hidler, and Maurice G. Baxter furnished a detailed background of Henry Clay while Clay's papers and his documented speeches provided insight towards his convictions that maintaining peace in the union through shared compromise would benefit everyone. Clay's moderate politics established a legacy that impacted Kentucky during the secession crisis.

The fourth chapter examined Clay's legacy on Kentucky's politics by tracing the political history of the Whig party in Kentucky, the critical election of 1860, the impact of the secession crisis on Kentucky, and the inevitable vote for neutrality by the state. The election of 1860 sharply divided Kentucky politics between native John C. Breckinridge and John Bell of Tennessee. Breckinridge surprisingly lost in his home state to Bell who ran on the Unionist ticket and promoted compromise for both the preservation of slavery and the Union. This provided political moderation in line with Kentucky's beliefs. When it became clear that the Union would split, Kentucky's leaders debated their state's future and decided neutrality to be the best course of action as the state could prosper without alienating either side. The *Louisville Daily Courier* and *New York Times* presented insight into opinions of average citizens while records from the Kentucky House of Representatives illuminated the position of many Kentucky political leaders. Kentucky would stay politically neutral until the military invasion of the

Confederacy in September of 1861 would force the state to align with the Union for self-preservation.

Only some historians are in agreement over why Kentucky chose neutrality. Author Russell Weigley felt that the mix of Henry Clay's political legacy and their southern heritage neutrality was Kentuckians natural choice. James McPherson agrees that Kentucky's choice of neutrality was the best outcome citizens could hope for and that the only "alternative was actual secession."¹²⁹ James Rawley presents a complete assessment of Kentucky's situation in stating, "Neutrality was the expression of Kentucky's uniqueness; it was not the outgrowth of timidity." He believed that "neutrality was a wise response to the state's dilemma and a logical result of her history," Rawley explains the policy "meant an interim victory for the anti-secessionist forces, and was perhaps the only course that could keep the state from seceding Neutrality also served the short-range political ends of both extremes during a period of agonizing incertitude." The period of neutrality provided Kentucky citizens with a time of reflection and allowed the divided state to grow internally and observe unfolding events between the Union and Confederacy.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Russell F. Weigley, *A Great Civil War: A Military and Political History, 1861-1865* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2000), 46; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University, 1988), 294.

¹³⁰ James A. Rawley, *Turning Points of the Civil War* (1966; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1989), 16.

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