

**Political Culture and
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Maculinity, Honor, and the
Antiparty Tradition,
1830–1860**

Christopher J. Olsen

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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*For Mom and Dad,
with love and thanks*

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Terre Haute, Indiana
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C. J. O.

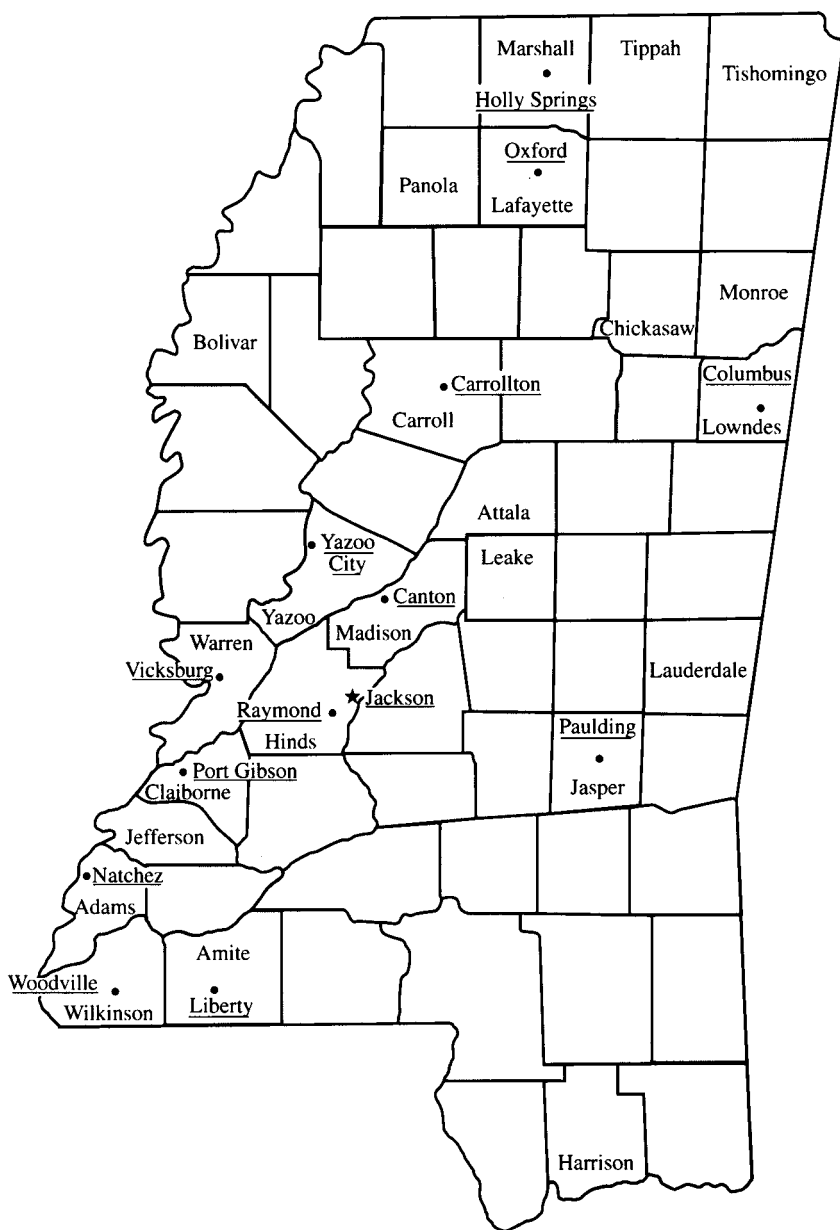
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Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi



Mississippi, ca. 1855, selected counties and towns.

Introduction

It was late October, 1855, in Handsboro, Mississippi. A typical afternoon barbecue turned tense and violent when Democrat Robert Saffold drew a loaded pistol, aimed, and threatened to shoot his opponent for the state senate, prominent attorney Roderick Seal (figure 1.1). The trouble began when, along with a crowd of several hundred others, Saffold and Seal listened to a speech by Know-Nothing Isaac Martin, a local Harrison County politician. In the course of his remarks, Martin claimed that President Thomas Jefferson had once directed his postmaster general to bar all foreigners from post office patronage. This order, he implied, demonstrated that the Democratic Party had discriminated against foreigners in the past, making its current complaints about the Know Nothings' nativist platform hypocritical and dishonest. When Saffold demanded proof of Jefferson's actions, Martin admitted he did not have a copy of the order. Seal then rose to defend his colleague, Martin, and chastized Saffold for interrupting the speech. This was the critical moment. Seal made a quick, but subtle, transition from partisan rhetoric to personal insult: he "declared that Saffold had given Martin the lie twice." This loaded phrase (also known as the "Lie Direct") implied that Saffold had charged Martin with willful and personal dishonesty. It constituted an important step in the ritualized protocol leading to a duel, the affair of honor that settled disputes among gentlemen. With his accusation, Seal conflated the partisan and the personal, interpreting Saffold's rather mundane partisan question as a dangerous slur against Martin's personal character.¹

Defending himself, Saffold "denied having given Martin the lie . . . [and avowed] he did not intend to question his veracity, that he had only asked for proof as he had a right to do, without intending offence." Martin, apparently satisfied, continued his speech after "order was restored." Only a few min-



FIGURE 1.1. Roderick Seal, lawyer and politician. Source: *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi; Embracing an Authentic and Comprehensive Account of the Chief Events in the History of the State, and a Record of the Lives of Many of the Most Worthy and Illustrious Families and Individuals* (Chicago: The Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1891). Courtesy of the Earl Gregg Swem Library, The College of William and Mary.

utes later, though, Saffold protested that Martin had exceeded his allotted time, a complaint overheard by Seal, who warned those within earshot that he would “deal with” anyone who interfered with Martin again. In response to an angry question from Saffold, Seal made good on his threat and “gave Saffold the Damned Lie.” The Damned Lie moved beyond the Lie Direct; it impugned a man’s honesty and character, his claim to public integrity and honor. So it was at this point that Robert Saffold knocked his opponent in the mouth, depositing him on his political backside, and drew a loaded pistol, which he leveled on the prostrated attorney. “When Seal was recovered and upon his feet, Saffold asked him if he was armed” and declared that he “would not shoot an unarmed man.” If Seal was armed (naturally he was), then he should draw his weapon; alternatively, he should “go and arm himself, [as] he Saffold was ready.” Apparently, friends stopped the confrontation at this point and persuaded the two candidates to settle their differences in the proper manner, away from the women and children.²

That these two men nearly fired at one another over offhand comments made in a routine speech presents an interesting study in political culture. Though Robert Saffold identified himself with the Democratic Party—or at least with Thomas Jefferson, one of its patriarchs—he interpreted Martin’s and Seal’s comments within a personal, not institutional, framework. Each man claimed membership in a political party (though both switched sides more than once during their careers), but their responses to partisan rhetoric indicated their adherence to a personal code different from that of much of the country. They did not assess language from within a personality structure that conformed to institutional patterns of thought. In other words, their culture was not grounded in civil and social institutions—including political parties—that work to restrain individual behavior and encourage a greater degree of emotional control. These institutional relationships necessitate a delayed and controlled response from individuals who operate within their structures, whereas a noninstitutional personality draws an immediate, personal inference and reacts, as Saffold did, instinctively.³ Most Mississippians spoke and acted in this way, suggesting they, too, considered politics and rhetoric personal matters. Men’s actions consistently betrayed their preference for face-to-face relationships that preserved an institutionally weak, anti-party political culture. The personal implications they perceived in every political exchange meant that men could not ignore insults submitted in any political forum (or form), an attitude that infused the whole system with violence, as the many duels between politicians and editors evince. In the Upper South and the North, by contrast, antipartyism had faded by midcentury and parties had become permanent, widely accepted institutions that depersonalized language and allowed men more easily to dismiss the customary partisan taunts.

Mississippi’s antiparty political culture distinguished it (and, I suspect, much of the Lower South) from other regions and explains why men denounced the Republican Party’s Free Soil program with such vehemence. In his study of Mississippi secession, historian William Barney underlines the “spontaneous reaction” that greeted Lincoln’s election: “Everyone expected that something had to be done,” even “conservatives.” The reasons for that spontaneous response lay in male gender roles, which conditioned voters to choose aggressive resistance to any insult, and in Mississippi’s political culture. The ultimate response, secession, was inspired by virtues of southern honor and masculinity, but Mississippi’s noninstitutional political culture provided the basis for its popularity. Thus, the sectional controversy became so emotionally charged and was taken so personally because it engaged men where they measured themselves—with and against their peers—and because it linked their understanding of masculinity and honor with the formal political system through which they effected secession.⁴

Since 1861 Americans have struggled to solve the great historical riddle of secession. Even before the final crisis, politicians and journalists specu-

lated about why southerners would consider leaving the vigorous, thriving nation they did so much to create. Many historians have related the narrative of events leading to secession in the individual Confederate states, training their attention on party politics, and national elections and politicians. Some others have looked, instead, to the underlying tensions or anxieties within southern society that pushed certain groups toward disunion, and which were brought to the surface in a crisis atmosphere that enveloped the fateful summer, and election, of 1860. I believe the best approach is one that combines both of these outlooks. Certainly secession, a political act, occurred within the mostly male world of formal politics: campaigns, elections, candidates, and speech making. But it was more deeply rooted than the short-term crisis suggests; men in the Deep South had considered secession before—in 1832 and in 1850. The final act of disunion resulted from consequences of the long-term interaction between the political culture, especially how men thought about politics, and the deeply held, pervasive values of southern male culture.⁵

While many fine works analyze in detail the party maneuvers and ideologies of national and state leaders, they primarily explain how a minority of white men thought and behaved—editors, professional politicians, and core party activists. However, reaching beyond national and state elections, beyond correspondence between presidents, senators, and governors, and focusing instead on the behavior and attitudes of rank-and-file voters can help explain why so many ordinary Mississippians endorsed secession rather than even consider accepting Abraham Lincoln as president. Something in the Republican message, or, rather, in their interpretation of it, prompted voters in seven states to react, nearly as a unit, with such a drastic measure. To understand the motivation behind that decision we need to lay bare the political culture that shaped the perspective of most voters.

Numerous studies confirm the narrow outlook of antebellum people, who saw little immediate relevance to what happened in Washington, D. C. or even in their state capital. County politics, I suggest, are crucial to understanding Mississippi's nineteenth-century political culture, especially its voters' attitudes toward party organization. Until they embraced parties in local races, when voters could choose between candidates as friends, neighbors, or kinsmen and did not have to follow party labels, the political culture must be considered *antiparty* or, at most, *deferential-participant*.⁶ Rejecting the legitimacy of parties created an attitude or political style that became a habit, a way of thinking that treated political rhetoric as a personal exchange. This attitude separated Mississippians from people in much of the country, including many fellow southerners in the Upper South; it provides a contrast that helps us understand the two-stage course of secession. A product of men's collective attitudes and culture, it was the final chapter to the political drama written during the antebellum years.

Therefore, rather than returning to the more well-covered ground of partisan ideology and national or state issues, in this work I place renewed emphasis on the purely local, nonpartisan, and nonideological nature of most Mississippi politics. In doing so, I hope to add to party studies by exploring what commonplace, familiar political actions meant to the great majority of ordinary folks—actions linking the preeminent, everyday political culture of the antebellum era to its climactic moment. This dominant, defining aspect of the political culture constituted a system embedded in the values and experiences of all Mississippi's white men. The wellspring of secession logic, it drew upon evangelical Protestantism, family and community identity, and patron-client relations—all of which were shaped by slavery and honor. In addition to secession, then, this study seeks to understand what politics and the act of voting meant to men in antebellum Mississippi and deals with a number of related issues: the intersection of gender and politics, southern class relations, and the effects of mobility in a stratified, hierarchical social system.

By choosing to study southern political culture and secession, I enter one of the most contested and vital debates in all of American historiography. Since the 1960s and 1970s, a number of historians have suggested that divisions within the South contributed significantly to the drive toward secession and civil war. They perceive a conflict, or potential conflict, between the white slaveowning and nonslaveowning classes. The slaveholding minority doubted that their less wealthy neighbors had a firm commitment to slavery and the southern way of life. They worried about the rising cost of slaves and land, and about soil exhaustion and erosion—all of which threatened access to the plantation dream. Thus, the argument runs, a ruling elite of masters engineered secession to unify southern white society and provide cheap land for southern farmers, which would help maintain the planters' hegemony over regional culture and economy.⁷ Another version, or aspect, of this internal crisis theory(ies) contends that many southerners, especially nonslaveholders, became anxious about socioeconomic changes that were drawing them into a market economy and threatening their self-sufficient independence. Fearful of an intrusive, hostile world symbolized by an activist, Free Soil Republican Party, they eagerly supported secession to preserve "white liberty"—a combination of freedom from government or modernization and a bulwark against racial warfare or "amalgamation."⁸

Other historians who emphasize internal divisions but see them as stumbling blocks to secession argue (or at least imply) that some group—usually designated *fire-eaters* or *secessionists*—precipitated the climactic crisis in 1861. Secession, they conclude, though it was probably supported by most voters, resulted from a confrontation managed by ambitious and sometimes scheming, if well-meaning, politicians.⁹ Still others portray secession as a sort of southern "Machiavellian moment," a crisis of republican government.

According to this reading, secessionists, convinced that the national government and political parties had become hopelessly corrupted, led a regional purge in “a revolution against politics.” And many scholars contend that fire-eaters revived and exploited antiparty sentiment after 1856–1857 in order to generate secessionist frenzy.¹⁰

Finally, a number of studies argue that the explanation of secession lies in the actions of politicians and the structure of politics and party competition. They conclude that control of the apparently all-powerful Democratic Party in the Lower South was the deciding factor: secession was possible because local Democratic leaders and many of the party’s rank-and-file committed to it, and the remainder of voters were carried along. In the Upper South, conversely, there were significant opposition parties to moderate Democratic rhetoric and offer alternative courses. Historian Michael Holt, in particular, insightfully argues that Upper-South voters had more confidence in parties and in their ability to fashion a sectional compromise because there were two long-lasting political organizations in those states.¹¹

Like the authors of these studies, I emphasize the existence of two distinct political cultures within the South. But instead of seeing one overpowering party in the Lower South, I argue that there was no real party tradition there at all. Persistent two-party competition over time in the Upper South was important, mainly because it helped foster a political culture that accepted parties as natural. That acceptance created more than a moderating platform; it also helped voters make a fundamental transition to thinking in institutional terms. In Mississippi, some faithful Democrats undoubtedly did support separate-state secession out of partisan loyalty, or simply habit. But the state’s party spokesmen portrayed Republicanism as a personal affront because most men interpreted politics within in a tradition of honor; this included “Cooperationists,” who made the same assessment, although some of them disagreed about the gravity of the insult or the appropriate form of resistance.

Rather than a product of internal class conflict or economic changes, secession was the result of a clash between antagonistic societies or, at least, what most white men regarded as such. Because of this sectional difference, Republican attacks against southern values and institutions precipitated the final break. Most offensive of all was the implicit, and sometimes explicit, accusation that southerners’ way of life was morally less worthy than that of their northern countrymen. It was the Republican attack on southerners themselves—and on their slave-based culture—that was the most important factor forcing the crisis. (As historians of antebellum northern politics have demonstrated, antisouthernism, and not antislavery or even Free Soil, was often the touchstone of Republican partisanship.)¹² For Mississippi’s men, therefore, secession became a popular crusade to vindicate themselves from the Republicans’ sectional critique and insistence on the Free Soil program. In voting for secession, Mississippians reacted, as they

saw it, to years of northern moral and political condemnation culminating in a suddenly popular antislavery party and the election of its candidate in 1860.

Bound by a regional ethic of honor—the lingua franca of southern sectionalism—Mississippi voters challenged one another to defend their communities as they believed men should. That ethic was the principal reason that politicians used the language of honor when speaking about the sectional crisis; they did not manipulate honor to become popular or gain votes but, rather, employed it with unself-conscious conviction, uniting with one another to safeguard their families, neighborhoods, and, ultimately, their regional way of life. Southern men were struggling to vindicate their own, as well as their society's reputation and character. This "manly imperative" was more important to them than preserving the Union and, ultimately, more important than simply extending slavery into the western territories. Yet slavery was inseparable from their regional identity, and it helped define southern masculinity and perpetuate honor. Like a cancer, slavery underlay variations among white Americans, spreading its malignant effects to warp southern gender norms, class relations, evangelical religion, and virtually every other cultural trait.

A number of factors ultimately convinced formerly hesitant men to support secession: fear of class or racial warfare spread by "Black Republicans"; economic hopes, dreams, and nightmares; and party loyalty. Upper South voters, too, delayed action for many reasons: fewer slaves in the region, more numerous economic and personal ties with northerners, and fear of war and destruction in their own backyards. But in Mississippi, and perhaps in the entire Deep South, the noninstitutional political culture provided the critical atmosphere that joined together these individual motives and facilitated, even demanded, manly action. It was the lens through which voters gauged the Republican threat and northern insults; in the Upper South, they had a different lens. Steeped in an ethos of public violence and conditioned by their fateful, antiparty political culture, Mississippi voters considered Lincoln's victory a personal attack. Secession and its possible consequences—death in defense of reputation—offered the only proper response for men who saw themselves as grievously insulted.

Political culture remains a popular term among historians. Over the last twenty years, many scholars have used it explicitly, others implicitly, both as something to be studied or explained and as a methodology or means to study social or cultural ethics. In this study, the term *political culture* includes both attitudes about politics and more tangible aspects of the political system: how votes were cast, the disposition of actual ballots and timing of elections, disqualification of voters, who voted for whom, and patronage. These elements, sometimes called *implicit orientations* or the *taken-for-granted*s of politics, are things so commonplace and ordinary that men seldom

notice them in operation. They reveal as much, or more, about a society as rhetoric, because they rest on assumptions so basic that they remain unspoken and, usually, unquestioned. Political culture, then, is more than editorials and speeches; it includes voting, running for office, and the voting process itself, among other taken-for-granted. The intersection of language and behavior is a—perhaps the—crucial feature of political culture because words, like all aspects of politics, can only be understood when grounded in the everyday lives of human beings. Considering behavior along with rhetoric, of course, also makes it possible to examine seriously the attitudes of illiterate and otherwise historically inarticulate people.¹³

If, in addition, we consider elections and politics from a ritualistic perspective, as social historians have done with many other public events, we broaden our understanding of what politics meant to ordinary folks. This effort can also let us see beyond the voters, since political rituals often encompassed the entire community—just as Clifford Geertz's famous Balinese cockfight involved more than just the gamblers—and delivered important messages about power and class, gender and race, and the culture in which those basic principles were negotiated.¹⁴ Thus, I would argue, using political culture as a methodology provides insights into values and attitudes that may not always be articulated or even consciously considered by many people. This approach rests on the potency of taken-for-granted and the power of discourse, especially when leaders articulate values, assumptions, and convictions *for* (not *to*) the masses.

Public exchanges reveal issues and concerns that are most salient to voters and leaders alike—which does not preclude the possibility that followers may act independently of their leaders (or vice versa)—because leaders primarily articulate what ordinary citizens think. In short, there is a reciprocal relationship between the symbols and rhetoric employed by community leaders and the values held by their “inarticulate” listeners. While politicians often operate at a more urbane and informed level, both the elite and masses are part of a common political culture.¹⁵ Mississippi Representative Reuben Davis perfectly captured this relationship when he described his resignation speech before Congress in 1860: “I spoke bitterly and with some angry vehemence,” Davis remembered, “because *I felt myself the mouthpiece of a wronged and outraged people, and their righteous indignation poured itself through me.*”¹⁶

Finally, like several recent works, this one combines the study of political culture and gender, what one historian has called “the politics of gender and the gendering of politics.” In other words, it considers gender norms part of political culture and looks for the connections between gender and electoral politics. Conceptually, however, it differs from other studies in two respects: first, rather than in the household or family roles, I maintain that southern men measured themselves in public rivalries with one another.¹⁷

Masculinity required them constantly to prove themselves because, as David Gilmore concludes: “the state of being a ‘real man’ or ‘true man’ [is] uncertain or precarious, a prize to be won or wrested through struggle.” From the perspective of women and slaves, white men certainly enjoyed privileges from their birth, but the struggle for “real” manhood could only be measured against other men. This emphasis, of course, did (and does) not dispute or invalidate the relational qualities of masculinity: what was not feminine or childish was manly. And like race and class, gender norms were constructed over time—shaped, to an extent, by variables such as age, marital status, class, race, education, and ethnicity—and dependent on the perspectives of individual men and women. But southern white men were always united by common principles, and they largely took for granted their superiority over women, children, and slaves, granting ultimate approval only to their peers. This process placed great emphasis on the public arena, especially politics. Thus, white men’s perspective on masculinity is decisive for our examination of antebellum political culture because they saw electoral politics—ultimately the source of secession—as a purely masculine forum. Of course, women participated in public political events, entering the “male sphere” to attend barbecues and speeches or even, on rare occasions, to debate issues in the partisan press. But what stands out in the political culture of antebellum Mississippi are its obsessively masculine and competitive qualities. Most of all, men prized physical courage, aggressiveness, and individual power; but they also valued reliability and loyalty to neighbors, kin, and other men in the community. When they invoked the household as a metaphor, for example, it was in the context of defending it better than, or at least as well as, other men did.¹⁸

The two most important factors that sustained this obsession with male rivalry and the importance of public reputation were slavery and the ethic of honor. The qualities of honor, a set of cultural virtues that lent structure to social relations and offered guidelines for human behavior, varied across time, space, and class; honor in medieval Spain necessarily differed from that of the Old South. Yet everywhere the ancient code held sway its defining mechanism was the same: a person’s inner self-worth was determined by one’s peers; every man submitted his reputation and good character to the community, which either affirmed or denied his claim after careful scrutiny of his family background and public comportment. “Honour was a quality, the contents of which eluded positive definition,” writes historian Ute Frevert, and “was discernible solely through the perceptions of others.” It was “a matter of interchanges between the individual and the community . . . meaning was imparted not with words alone, but in courtesies, rituals, and even deeds of personal and collective violence.” This mechanism, then, placed extraordinary value on outward appearance, style, and language. Most important, the community’s judgment was internalized by individuals,

which gave the code its exceptional power to unite public behavior and social scrutiny with a man's personal, emotional, and psychological self-worth.¹⁹

Finally, while honor operated most basically at the individual level, it remained intimately connected with the community. The community, after all, conferred status on the individual. Thus insults leveled against the community called into question a man's own personal honor, validated as it was by his peers. Conversely, questioning a man's reputation undermined the collective honor of everyone who sanctioned him. In other words, each individual and his community were bound by honor in a mutually sustaining relationship demanding that each defend the reputation of the other. "Honor and shame are reciprocal moral values," concludes one student of the ethic, "representing primordial integration of individual to 'group.'" Thus, the dictates of honor underscored loyalty to clan and community and the importance of personal courage and manly dependability.²⁰

Slavery also required white men to demonstrate physical power and proclaimed the functional importance of violence to maintaining discipline. It placed a premium on courage, loyalty, and the reliability of all the white men of the community. Slavery also reinforced men's preoccupation with public reputation, especially physical courage, because southerners "defined a slave as a person without honor," as someone cowardly who would not, and could not, risk his life for family or principles. Slaves could be called and considered liars and cowards and have no recourse, while free men of honor reacted fiercely to such slurs. Thus, the combined effects of honor and slavery mutually sustained a regional obsession with aggressive, competitive masculinity, but also with loyalty to other white men.²¹

The second way the present work differs from many studies of gender and politics is that it joins gender analysis with such time-honored methods of political history as analysis of voting returns and taken-for-granted. I am therefore advocating a model of political culture that combines some of the insights of anthropology and of gender and ritual studies with evidence and methods more familiar to political historians and political scientists. Combining diverse sources—some unused before now—and an approach that surveys the entire state of Mississippi gives the work, I believe, a broad perspective. Written evidence, of course, is always biased toward the elite. In politics, this record favors party activists and those most concerned with state or national issues, particularly men who corresponded across county and state lines. Relying on state organs written by party leaders also gives undue attention to state and national elections. Finally, concentrating on one county sometimes magnifies the distortion, since historians typically choose counties with good manuscript collections and towns large enough to support competing partisan newspapers. All these factors exaggerate the importance of parties and issues among the mass of voters and overstate the driving power of state and national concerns.²²

Instead, therefore, of focusing principally on state and national politics, I emphasize the manuscript returns from thousands of local and county elections across the state. They demonstrate that residency was the decisive factor in voter behavior; consistently high turnout at all levels testifies to the importance men placed on local offices. Moreover, although it utilizes statewide party organs, this study relies more heavily on rural newspapers, which often presented a different picture of the issues that were important to Mississippi readers. When combined with testimony from the county boards of police (the basic unit of local government), these sources sketch a rich, diverse, and hotly contested world of local politics—filled with some colorful, even comic, characters—in which parties played no meaningful role. A statewide perspective also reveals a complex and varied political culture. It registers the impact of towns and partisan newspapers, population density, socioeconomic diversity, and the evolution of rural neighborhoods. Finally, Mississippi's antebellum experience reminds us that political culture did not take a linear, consistent path from hierarchy to democracy or from antiparty to strong parties. Rather, it often ebbed and flowed unevenly.

At the foundation of Mississippi's political culture was a suspicion of political parties and professional politicians that was expressed in speeches, public letters and pamphlets, editorials, and private correspondence. Despite these paeans to antiparty principles, though, most historians contend that Whigs and Democrats enjoyed an intense emotional commitment from voters who operated within identifiable belief systems traceable to state and local elections. Many studies of states in the North and the Upper South offer strong support for this position. By the 1840s and 1850s, antipartyism had become a marginal, or sporadic, part of public discourse as both leaders and rank-and-file voters demonstrated a consistent faith in party organization. Most important, men apparently carried their partisan identifications into county and even local contests. Thus, concludes one recent study, "the key difference by 1838 was that . . . high interest and commitment and strong party institutions fed by intense partisanship became permanent [and] deeply rooted," and all Americans demonstrated a "widespread acceptance of the party role in American politics."²³ In large parts of the country, yes, but not in Mississippi.

Mississippi's parties did have support, especially from editors, national politicians, and some core activists. There were certainly elements of modern parties—electioneering and hundreds of campaign rallies, for instance. Men recorded their party identification by wearing pins and buttons, marching with coonskin caps and dragging miniature log cabins through town; women sewed banners and "civilized" a hundred parades with their inevitably "graceful" presence. People, in short, shouted "huzzah" for their party in a thousand different ways. But what did it mean to them? Evidence suggests that most voters became Whigs or Democrats because of family heritage or community tradition and that most people considered party events

to be primarily social, community functions. Most crucially, as the opening vignette implies, most voters identified with candidates as individual men, not as the impersonal representative of a cause. In short, men could be Democrats or Whigs but still not think in institutional terms because they were never reconciled to the supposed benefits or inevitability of party organization.

Far from fanatical devotion, Mississippians' language and behavior evinced a shallow and weak partisan culture. Most voters paid more than lip service to antiparty principles; they avoided parties whenever possible, and many switched loyalties with no apparent anxiety. In national or state races in which few voters could know candidates personally, they were often forced to follow party labels, though they still complained loudly about the evils of party organization. Furthermore, even at that level, contemporaries acknowledged that thousands of new or uncommitted voters would determine each contest, an expectation also borne out by election returns. Because of geographic mobility, natural demographic turnover, and voter choice, uncertainty characterized the whole party "system." Mississippi's Whigs, in particular, barely qualified as a coherent party. Below the state level, parties had almost no impact: party activists failed to bring about county nominations, control access to most public offices, or connect party opinion with local races. Thus, perhaps the crucial measurement of public opinion was the fact that whenever they had the opportunity voters rejected parties. That does not mean that there were no parties or that voters did not, at times, respond to party leaders or slogans. But it does reflect a political culture that was noninstitutional and preferred personal relationships; one could be a Whig or a Democrat without actually believing in the virtue of parties.

Instead, most politics revolved around networks of friends and neighbors, a set of community bonds driven by face-to-face relationships. In such a personal political culture, men relied on their own or their families' reputations and resources. It was an ideal system for men whose lives were defined by public image and perception, but it only worked as long as parties remained marginal and ineffective, especially at the local level.²⁴ Candidates for numerous county and precinct officers reflected the prevailing social hierarchy, suggesting that most Mississippians knew, or quickly learned, where they stood in the pecking order. As one of several important male public rituals, politics allowed voters to assert their proper place and status within the community. Family influence and honor also allowed planters to extend their power and prestige to the next generation. Thus, the political culture provided a crucial bridge between the seemingly irreconcilable traits of widespread geographic and, sometimes, social mobility and a hierarchical society based on honor and slavery that accepted, even celebrated, inequality. In short, an exploration of how politics operated in the neighborhood

suggests that it was much less democratic or ideological than is often assumed and highlights the importance of personal power and position in the community.

This antiparty, ritualistic political culture combined with southern notions of masculinity and honor to precipitate secession. In 1860 most Mississippi voters concluded they could not accept a Republican victory. Rather than “bow in craven submission” to the “yoke” of Yankee insults, they rallied to assert their own masculinity, their family and community honor, and to answer the public slur of Free Soil. Conditioned by their political culture, men like Robert Saffold interpreted (Republican) partisan rhetoric as a personal insult. Prickly about their masculinity and honor, most Mississippians responded with predictable outrage and, eventually, with violence. Thus, a set of deeply held convictions about honor and the duty of men to protect themselves and their community from insult led to a fracturing of the Republic—because of the state’s political culture. When community leaders articulated the sectional controversy in terms of “craven submission” or “manly resistance,” they meant that docile acquiescence would be personally humiliating. Political parties of a modern tenor, with their bureaucratic machinery and sets of impersonal candidates, could have defused the potent language of manliness and honor; insults offered through the institutionalized anonymity of effective parties might have been ignored. But in the absence of that partisan tradition, secession represented the natural interaction of southern honor, men’s visceral anger, and the state’s antiparty, community-based political culture.

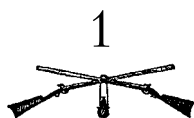
This work takes both a narrative and a topical organization. Chapter 1 details Mississippi’s evolution in the 1830s and early 1840s, tracing the state’s rapid growth and describing its emerging political system. The chapter also outlines the development of an intensely masculine public culture under frontier conditions and, later, within a slave society. As men learned to value ferocity, physical courage, loyalty, and dependability, they fashioned a personal, face-to-face political culture based on those values and the country’s celebrated heritage of white man’s democracy. Sectional conflict and the possibility of secession form the background of chapter 2, which examines the crisis of 1849–1851. It demonstrates the weakness of party ties and the ease with which voters abandoned supposedly strong commitments. It also clarifies the importance of honor and manliness to the language of sectionalism and to the regional political culture. Chapters 3 and 4 trace the politics of antipartyism through popular rhetoric and voting behavior. Both Whigs and Democrats painted their opponents as professional “demagogues” and slaves to “rigid organization.” These appeals, I argue, signaled a widespread popular distrust of political parties and demonstrated that most voters still considered them an unnatural and, hopefully, unnecessary part of political

life. Not only did Mississippians talk a good antiparty game, but quantitative evidence indicates that as voters they rejected party organization whenever possible.

Chapter 5 discusses neighborhoods as the foundation of the state's political culture. County and local politics revolved around rural residency patterns, and voters typically supported neighborhood candidates. Indeed, the neighborhood so thoroughly defined rural politics that state and county governments, respecting the force of community will, codified it into law. The ritualistic functions of politics are the subject of chapter 6. The election process—that is, voting and running for office—stabilized class relationships and allowed men who prized and benefitted from geographic and social mobility to restore a hierarchical, even deferential, society. Mississippi's localized political culture helped define and perpetuate the community power structure, permitting planter families to maintain power over time. In short, it reconciled American democracy and egalitarianism with the hierarchical values inherent in honor and slavery.

In chapter 7 I analyze the most fascinating aberration of Mississippi's antebellum political culture, the Know-Nothings. For two years, even at the local level, many voters began to embrace parties; for the first time, the state's political culture moved toward partisan. Allowed to develop, a viable two-party system like that in the Upper South and the North might have evolved. Such a fundamental reordering of the political culture could have changed the attitude of Mississippi's voters and conditioned them—like their counterparts farther north—to think in institutional terms. Theoretically, such a change might have stopped secession. The Know-Nothings, however, were divided in 1856—a crucial moment—and Mississippians became more and more united in the face of Republican opposition to slavery and the South's political power. Politics in the late 1850s and secession, the subjects of chapter 8, manifested the ultimate power of personal politics and the violent consequences of honor and manliness. It was an unfortunate, indeed lethal, combination.

Finally, although this work treats only one state, Mississippi was representative of the Deep South. Its social, economic, and demographic profile were similar to other states in the region, and it eventually took the lead, with South Carolina, in the movement for southern unity and disunion. But whereas South Carolina had a uniquely undemocratic political system, Mississippians enjoyed almost unparalleled power at the ballot box, making it an ideal subject for study of the interaction between popular politics and southern social ethics. Secession was a political action driven by forces deep within southern culture, and nowhere were these forces more clearly manifested than in Mississippi. The state's voters listened to northerners "threaten" and "insult" them for more than a decade. They responded as their culture, and their political culture, taught: with direct action and violence.



A SAVAGE PLACE

The Mississippi Frontier, Masculinity, and Political Culture in the 1830s

“The present inhabitants,” wrote Judge Ephraim Kirby upon his arrival in frontier Mississippi, “are illiterate, wild and savage, of depraved morals.” One hopes he exaggerated, but Kirby’s judgment captures the spirit of many early settlers struggling to tame the state’s savage conditions. Mostly a wilderness, much of the state belonged to American Indians until the 1820s and 1830s, when a succession of treaties cleared the way for white settlement. Even at the time of secession, many areas still resembled a frontier. Another early resident spoke for thousands when he recalled “that the times then tried the stuff men were made of.”¹ Part of the settlement heritage, reinforced and sustained by slavery and scattered residence, was a glorification of certain manly virtues: physical courage and aggressiveness, but also reliability and loyalty to neighbors and kin. Confirmed in public, face-to-face encounters between men, these values defined masculinity and reinforced the demands of honor, linking individual men with their peers in the community. After 1830 rapid immigration sparked social and economic development and created a more complex society. Settlers began to enjoy greater social stability, more coherent and supportive neighborhoods, and some outward signs of “civilization.”

In the 1830s a nascent political culture also took shape. Founded in the state’s rural communities, it celebrated and enshrined white male democracy and operated within local networks of friends, neighbors, and kinsmen. Because most candidates and voters knew each other, personal reputation and face-to-face contacts were the most important ingredients of political success. This political culture allowed men to demonstrate both personal independence as sovereign voters and loyalty to fellow members of the community by supporting local candidates. It thus conformed to, and helped men satisfy, the requirements of honor and manliness. It only worked, how-