This thesis examines regional identity on the Ohio River, particularly in Cincinnati and Louisville, during the antebellum period. Connected by one of the most important transportation networks in the United States, cities along the Ohio River transcended the laws and cultural practices of their respective states to form a coherent “Western” regional identity. This thesis challenges the myth that people saw the Ohio River primarily as a border between slave and free states. Traffic along the Ohio River made the economic and social institutions of the towns on either bank similar, blurring the distinctions between slavery and free labor in the process. This riverine community saw themselves as Westerners more than members of the North or South. Experiences in this corner of the United States demonstrate that Americans, regardless of their state affiliation, were more than willing to profit from slavery if given the opportunity.
ONE RIVER, ONE NATION:
THE OHIO RIVER IN AN AMERICAN BORDERLAND, 1800-1850

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of History
by
Zachary Morgan Bennett
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2013

Advisor___________________________
Andrew R.L. Cayton

Reader___________________________
Amanda Kay McVety

Reader___________________________
Tatiana Seijas
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 1: Navigating Westward ............................................................................................ 8

CHAPTER 2: Commercial Connections .................................................................................... 29

CHAPTER 3: Laboring “between liberty and servitude” ....................................................... 47

AFTERWORD .......................................................................................................................... 63

APPENDIX .............................................................................................................................. 66

BIBLIOGRAPHY ...................................................................................................................... 70
INTRODUCTION

“Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries—stand that man on his legs, set his feet a-going, and he will infallibly lead you to water”—Herman Melville, 1852

This thesis examines regional identity on the Ohio River during the antebellum period. Connected by one of the most important transportation networks in the United States, cities along the Ohio River transcended the laws and cultural practices of their respective states to form a coherent “Western” regional identity. Members of this riverine community saw themselves as Westerners more than members of the North or South. These sentiments endured through the 1850s.

The goal of this thesis is to show that commerce along the Ohio River facilitated a common Western, or “river interest” between 1800 and 1850. The work of Kim Gruenwald and John Jakle identify the Ohio River as a source of unity, not division, up to 1830.¹ Historians of the Civil War era also see this phenomenon in their studies of the region.² This work ties these two periods together by demonstrating that people living in river cities, particularly merchants or those otherwise engaged in commerce, held common interests through the antebellum period precisely because they lived along a geographical space which put them in constant contact with one another.

Kim Gruenwald has asserted that “Ohioans’ sense of place was in a flux…during the 1830s and 1840s.” Similarly, John Jakle accepts the observations of visitors to the Ohio Valley as symptomatic of opinions held by the people who actually lived beside the Ohio River. Both conclude that by 1830 Western regional identity in the Ohio Valley had been rent by the slavery

issue.\textsuperscript{3} For communities along the Ohio River, this was not the case. Ohioans unconnected to the Ohio River network along the Great Lakes certainly felt more affinity with the northeast than “the West,” especially after the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. However, the “canal and railroad eras” did not sever people’s ties to the Ohio River to the extent Gruenwald and Jakle suggest.\textsuperscript{4} The Ohio River continued to be the major transportation network west of the Appalachian Mountains through the antebellum period. The economic opportunities available with river transportation made regional unity in the interest of those living next to that highway. This “river interest” held no clear attitude toward slavery. The western flow of the Ohio River brought many different people together into one space, and Western regional identity most simply defined was the accommodation of this difference.

Until the advent of rail, travel over land paled in comparison to water’s capacity to convey people and goods through space. The first generation of Americans deeply understood the importance water would have in the future of the nation. Men such as George Washington and Albert Gallatin realized that if the United States were to remain a united body, waterways would need to serve as the veins that would keep it a connected whole. Without strong economic bonds, Americans would strain to find common cause across their immense and newly formed nation. The founding generation envisioned highways of water connecting the markets of eastern states to the trans-Appalachian west and the Ohio River.\textsuperscript{5}

But instead of being recognized as a source of sectional harmony and connection as the founders hoped, the Ohio River has symbolized racial and cultural difference for the past two-hundred and fifty years. Native Americans and the British first set the Ohio as a political boundary with a treaty at Fort Stanwix, New York in 1768. The results of that agreement created an inviolable line separating race and culture. By the time the United States government wrested control of Ohio from the Indians in the 1790s, the notion of the Ohio River as a boundary between Native and European peoples was lost. Although one boundary faded into irrelevance, another had already been set up. Congress organized its western territories in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, proscribing slavery north of the Ohio River. Such a measure could not be

\textsuperscript{3} Gruenwald, \textit{River of Enterprise}, 147; Jakle, \textit{Images of the Ohio Valley}, 4, 162.
\textsuperscript{4} Gruenwald, \textit{River of Enterprise}, 147.
passed south of the river, since Kentucky remained a county of slave-holding Virginia. By 1787, Kentucky was already heavily populated by Americans, and only five years away from admission as a state. Its first settlers crossed the mountains from Virginia and the Carolinas, bringing the peculiar institution with them. Kentuckians protected slavery in their inaugural 1792 state constitution. Once again, it seemed that the Ohio River mattered more as a significant boundary line, this time between slave and free labor.  

The Ohio River has always been more than just a river. From 1787 to 1865 the Ohio was the longest contiguous border between slave and free societies in the United States. From the small river hamlets of East Liverpool, Ohio to Cairo, Illinois, a distance of approximately one thousand miles, the Ohio River was a wall of water between human bondage and free labor. It is this fact that makes the river a prominent geographical space in the American cultural consciousness. For visitors to the region, traveling the Ohio’s course was a powerful experience fraught with symbolism. Alexis de Tocqueville described his voyage down the river in 1831 as physically sailing “between liberty and servitude.” African-Americans fleeing from slavery saw the Ohio River in Biblical proportions, referring to it as the River Jordon. Although the river flowed entirely within the United States, the different laws and social customs on either side represented for many two contesting visions of what that nation should become.

From the perspective of outside observers, the Ohio River divided a nation. But for the people who actually lived along the Ohio, it united a region. They called this region “the West.” Americans today conceive the west as primarily trans-Mississippian. America’s first west was originally anything west of the Appalachian Mountains stretching from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. The limits of communication and transportation in the early nineteenth century made political and regional solidarity over this immense space impossible. People forming communities across the mountains identified themselves with people who grew similar crops, or who were of kindred cultural extraction. In very general terms, Americans in south-western states like Tennessee and Alabama were more likely to be of Scotch-Irish descent and growing cotton or tobacco. The majority of Americans in north-western communities on the Great Lakes

---


harvested grains and were of New England stock. Where these two regions met at the Ohio River, such distinctions or generalizations proved difficult to apply. Instead of trying to pick between these two social trajectories, people in the Ohio Valley prior to 1850 considered themselves “Westerners.” Nowhere was this sense of Western identity stronger than on the Ohio River.

There is no getting around the fact that the Ohio River was among the most notorious and violent boundaries in the antebellum United States. As Stanley Harrold has documented, conflict constantly erupted along this border. The retributions and vigilantism of aggrieved slave owners and impassioned abolitionists caught the headlines, but such coverage generally highlights the actions of radical fringe characters. This thesis uncovers the daily lives of a moderate majority whose commercial activity failed to qualify as the kitsch sensationalized by newspaper writers motivated more by increasing subscriptions than accurate reporting. Fierce rivalries existed among river cities as well, particularly between Louisville and Cincinnati. Ironically, the issues river cities were fighting over further supports the notion that they were a regional community. It was not so much disagreement on an issue like slavery that produced antagonism, but competition for river commerce. That this was the major source of discord evinces the similarity between these places, not their differences.

The Ohio River was at the core of Western regional identity. This is the river’s great significance before the Civil War. Water was the quickest mode of transportation until the introduction of steam-powered railroad technology to the region midway through the nineteenth century. As a result, almost all the natural resources exported from the surrounding valley funneled to the river. This conveyed a diverse group of people from the surrounding countryside to one place. My first chapter will show that it was in the economic interest of the people of the Ohio Valley to keep the navigation of the Ohio River open and safe. This was easier said than done however, and the struggle to make the river passable united the region politically. The second chapter on commerce shows that the river towns that sprouted along the Ohio River were cosmopolitan, commercial places, distinct from other settlements in the region. The mercantile nature of these river towns made slavery and profit virtually inseparable in the West. My final

---

chapter on labor challenges the assertions of observers such as Tocqueville that the Ohio River sharply divided two social models: slavery and freedom. Westerners grew similar things and consequently the exports of river cities were virtually indistinguishable. Whites in river cities also held very similar attitudes toward race, keeping blacks in subservient roles regardless of their official status as either slave or free. The Ohio River was a source of connection more than division before the Civil War. The geography carved by the river made the people who lived there similar economically, culturally, and politically; laws crafted by men could do little to overcome that.

Historians of the Early Republic have investigated the flow of labor and capital along free and slave states and its impact on the lives of the people who actually lived along these putative demarcations. Whether tracing agricultural practices between Maryland and Pennsylvania or the experiences of street cleaners, these studies suggest that we have fetishized state borders in the antebellum period. Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron’s appraisal of borderlands scholarship maintains that political boundaries only became enforceable entities in North America following the demise of the European imperial structure at the close of the eighteenth century. Yet even the tangibility of these “bordered lands” is being thrown into question. Seth Rockman and Max Grivno’s analysis of the Upper South highlights the interchangeable nature of slave and free labor among hired farm hands and the very poor in the Early Republic. The experience of states like Maryland and Pennsylvania show that the Mason-Dixon Line was hardly a steadfast boundary separating labor practices and points to the potential for commerce to transcend cultural and political mores.10

I extend the implications of these studies on the permeability of boundaries to the Ohio River. Scholars traditionally apply the borderlands concept to the spaces at the limits of American colonial empires. Historians of the Ohio Valley have preferred the term “border state” over the borderlands concept when they approach the region in the nineteenth century. I acknowledge that the antebellum Ohio Valley was unlike colonial borderlands in that the region

---

had distinct and enforceable political boundaries. As states, Kentucky and Ohio were very different places, organized around eighteenth-century political structures originating in Jeffersonian and Federalist approaches to government respectively. Nonetheless, this thesis highlights the ability of geographical connection to supersede state political structure and affiliation. The borderlands concept is both applicable and useful to this work because it underscores the relationships across the river. To call the Ohio River in the antebellum period a border implicitly underemphasizes the riverine economy in the region. It was exactly because labor practices varied across this space that each side needed to adjust their behavior to accommodate the other. Kentuckians tolerated the presence of abolitionists in their communities to a greater extent than other Southern states. Similarly, Ohio’s black codes were among the harshest for free states, and Cincinnati held a notorious reputation for its poor accommodation of free blacks and fugitive slaves.\(^{11}\)

Several studies have looked at the cities in the Ohio Valley separately, examining them as economic and social communities on a significant American border. Race and class sharply divided these cities into distinct social stratum; but many chose to remain because the community benefitted them in some way. This work takes a similar approach, but with a locus larger than just an urban center. Just as tension from competing groups could wrack a city, so too was this present in this riverine community but it stuck together because it was in the interest of its members to do so.\(^{12}\)

Readers will note that this thesis stops at 1850 despite the fact that I claim to cover the antebellum period. Although I maintain that Western regional solidarity existed through the outbreak of civil war, to adequately cover the decade following the Compromise of 1850 would require more space than I am allotted for this work. My aim is to show that the Ohio River

---


\(^{12}\) Almost all of the urban studies pertain to Cincinnati, while Louisville has received little attention by comparison. Rarer still are pieces that compare these cities against each other. Daniel Aaron, Cincinnati, Queen City of the West, 1819-1838 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002); Nikki M. Taylor, Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati’s Black Community, 1802-1868 (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005); Steven J. Ross, Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788-1890 (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 1985); Henry Louis Taylor, ed. Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820-1970 (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, 1993).
facilitated connection more than division during the early nineteenth century and did not falter in 1830 as some historians have suggested. Events like the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Dred Scott case drove the nation apart on a national level, not necessarily a regional one. Evaluating regional reactions in the Ohio Valley to the heightening national crisis over slavery in the 1850s needs to be explored further by historians. I would willingly embark on such an endeavor, yet I fear covering the 1850s would make this thesis more about the Civil War, which is not my intention. Therefore, to provide the best picture of what existed before internecine conflict irrevocably transformed the Ohio Valley, the 1850s are best left to other historians to give more justice to that period.\footnote{For coverage of the 1850s in the Ohio Valley, see Stanley Harrold, \textit{Border War: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010) and Christopher Phillips, \textit{The Rivers Run Backward: The Civil War on the Middle Border and the Making of American Regionalism} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).}

Water firmly bounded the lives of Ohio Valley residents. The advent of the telegraph and railroads gradually alleviated the “tyranny of space,” but the fortunes of merchants and the delivery of news and mail remained at the mercy of the Ohio’s capricious seasonal depth changes through the 1880s.\footnote{The Davis Island Lock and Dam built in 1885 was the first of a series of improvements to the Ohio River that led to the consistent water depths we see today. Leland R. Johnson, \textit{The Davis Island Lock and Dam, 1870-1922} (Pittsburgh District: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1985).} In both Louisville and Cincinnati, businesses selling everything from cotton to shoes put “Western” in their company names, publications were advertised to regional “Western” audiences, and the majority of visitors staying in river city hotels called other “Western” river communities home. Since this riverine economy was based around the same transportation network, the physical presence of bank notes, insurance policies, and business factors evenly flowed to both sides of the Ohio River. Regardless of whether people living along the Ohio River genuinely liked each other, they shared economic bonds rooted in geography. This interconnected commercial environment made the so-called collision of slavery and wage-labor a negotiated space where gripping sectional tension was less acute. The Ohio River served as a fluid source of connection for people, salving a region persistently confronted by a national crisis on the future of slavery in the United States.
CHAPTER 1: Navigating Westward

The early national period in the United States was an age of remarkable economic growth and unabashed self-promotion. When the location of a railroad or canal could suddenly make or dash the fortunes of a town and its leading figures, competition for government support of internal improvements was intense. The capability for man-made transportation systems to “bring civilization” to swaths of American territory hitherto remote wilderness enticed private citizens, states, and the federal government into investing in such projects. Success stories, such as the Erie Canal in New York, inspired residents in practically every corner of the country to conjure up their own public works schemes. But many of these projects, such as the ominously named Dismal Swamp Canal between North Carolina and Virginia, or the Main Line System in Pennsylvania, failed to return on their investment and wasted a substantial amount of public funds. The ensuing intrigue and voter disapproval of these endeavors resulted in the federal government rarely parceling out financial support after the Jackson Administration.\(^\text{15}\)

For towns along the Ohio River, the canal craze that hit the United States in the 1820s took a different form, and lasted well past the Civil War. Although river towns were certainly affected by the race to build artificial waterways, their primary concern rested with navigational improvements on the Ohio River. Cities like Louisville and Cincinnati owed their existence to the river trade, and the commercial interests in these towns recognized that improvements to the river ensured their prosperity more than the introduction of any alternative transportation network. This chapter will show that campaigns to improve the navigation of the Ohio River united the people living along its banks, regardless of state affiliation.\(^\text{16}\)

In the early nineteenth century, Americans living along the Ohio River oriented themselves in relation to that body. Until the 1820s, the stricture of natural watercourses limited human traffic in the new American West. This transportation network boiled down essentially to the Ohio River and its tributaries. The western direction of the Ohio brought together an effluence of Yankees, Virginians, slaves, and European immigrants. The one commonality these people shared was the river, and despite their diverse backgrounds, their individual prosperity was tied to that body of water. When water levels failed to cooperate with the ambitions of farmers and merchants, agricultural exports festered in the docks while prices for highly prized manufactured imports skyrocketed. This major commercial artery also happened to be a political boundary between states; it was inevitable that people from different states and territories crossed paths on the Ohio.

In the Ohio Valley, river transportation flowing to New Orleans was the preferred commercial highway well through the Civil War. Settlers who crossed the Appalachians found relatively cheap land and fertile soil in comparison to that of the eastern states. However, efforts to improve that land were pointless if farmers could not send their agricultural produce to the markets and population centers across the mountains. After Spain granted Americans access to the Mississippi River and New Orleans in 1795, rivers became the quickest way for Westerners to send their goods to the east coast. The opening of New York’s Erie Canal in 1825 first challenged the dominance of the Ohio-Mississippi River trade by shifting much of upper Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois’ development and economic output to the Great Lakes. The construction of other alternative transportation networks like the Ohio and Erie Canal (connecting the Ohio River to Lake Erie), the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (connecting Baltimore to the Ohio River), and the Cumberland Road (connecting the Potomac River to central Ohio) further strengthened the state of Ohio’s connections with the eastern seaboard. But these developments failed to eclipse the preeminence of the “southern triangle” trade originating in Pittsburgh, passing through New Orleans, and continuing to the markets of major cities on the east coast. Until 1845, more outgoing cargo from the western country reached New Orleans than all eastern routes combined. Trade patterns in Cincinnati, the largest city in the West, are indicative of this trend. In 1850, the Queen City sent ninety percent of its flour and eighty percent of its whiskey
exports southward.\textsuperscript{17} Rivers would continue to prevail over railroads as the dominant mode of shipping Western agricultural produce well into 1880s.\textsuperscript{18}

Previous historians have concluded that the introduction of canals and railroads shifted perceptions of the Ohio River away from its earlier role as source of regional identity to a dividing line between slave and free states. Their conclusions rest on the observations of travelers to the region, or the business decisions of individual families. They assert that after 1830, residents began to see the Ohio River as primarily a boundary between slave and free societies, and that canals and other networks pulled their business interests in opposite directions. This argument fails to address why river traffic through Louisville peaked in 1855.\textsuperscript{19} Canals and roads did in fact shift much of Ohio’s exports to the northeast, but the Ohio River continued to be the most travelled highway in and out of the region.

The Ohio River was the site of ever increasing commercial activity in the early nineteenth century, and hardly a boundary. There are a few explanations for this. First, as steam technology improved, shipping rates progressively declined, making river transportation both fast and cheap. Second, internal improvements that provided access to inland markets supplemented the river trade. Trans-Appalachian farmers ultimately wanted to reach the markets of eastern cities so those living closer to the Great Lakes preferred to send their foodstuffs on the Erie Canal. But by the 1820s, communities hitherto isolated by distance could also send their agricultural produce via canals to river communities for processing and export. The Ohio River may have lost its monopoly on the carrying trade in the region, but alternative routes spurred development on the interior, some of which fed back to the river. Instead of just drawing people away from the Ohio River, canals and roads also brought more people from diverse locales and backgrounds into contact with one other, accelerating the growth of river cities.\textsuperscript{20}

At the political level, people living in cities along the Ohio River identified themselves as Westerners through the 1850s. As with today, state pride ran high among Westerners, but they called the region of the United States they inhabited “the West.” One of the major impetuses for

\textsuperscript{17} Haites, \textit{Western River Transportation}, 124-127.
\textsuperscript{20} Haites, \textit{Western River Transportation}, 7, 64-66.
this regional affiliation was their reaction to government’s failure to improve the navigability of the Ohio River. Citizens’ business interests were persistently imperiled by the Ohio’s seasonal depth changes, shifting sandbars, and other obstructions such as submerged rocks and logs. Sometimes the river was only passable for larger steamboats four months out of an entire year. John Randolph quipped on the floor of Congress that “it was no river at all, as it was frozen up one half of the year and dried up the other half.” Randolph’s claim may have been more sarcastic than serious, but travelers often quoted the old Senator from Virginia when the natural temperaments of the Ohio unexpectedly delayed their progress by days or even weeks. With government funds being spent on improving eastern harbors and the safety of ocean-going vessels, Westerners tied to the Ohio-Mississippi River network lobbied for equal consideration of their interests. Although the popularity of the American System espoused by the likes of Henry Clay offered early hope for federal support of internal improvement projects on the Ohio River, Democratic presidents beginning with Andrew Jackson took a stricter interpretation of the Constitution which viewed the improvement of inland rivers as the responsibility of states rather than the federal government. Affronted by this perceived injustice, communities on both shores of the Ohio River united as men of the western waters in an attempt to secure their mutual fortune.

The loss of river-going craft to natural obstacles was no trifle. According to the figures presented in Congress by Captain Davis Embree, three out of every ten steamboats built before 1849 were lost to accidents. Such a persistent loss of lives and capital to the muddy riverbed wracked the economic health of river communities. In an 1844 petition sent to Congress, citizens of Cincinnati expressed their frustration:

> the destructive hurricane purifies the atmosphere, and the carcasses that moulder on the battle field enrich the soil; but the wealth ingulfed [sic] in the bosom of the waters yields

---

22 For a comparison of federal expenditures on rivers and harbors and its proportionality to population, see Serial set 2030, House Exec. Doc. 133, 50-152 and for funding *Statement of Appropriations and Expenditures 1789 to 1882, 47th Cong., 1st sess., 1882*, Sen. Doc. 196. The American System, broadly defined, was a model for economic and social improvement based on support of domestic products through tariffs, and improved transportation networks which would unify the country and promote economic growth; Maurice Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1995); Government support of rivers amounted to a little over three million dollars before the Civil War. Even as the western states reliant on river networks grew to about a quarter of the overall US population in 1820, and a third by 1840, federal appropriations for rivers failed to be equally proportioned to that given to harbors on the Atlantic. Funding fluctuated year to year, but federal monies reserved for rivers were usually less than twenty-five percent of that given to harbors between 1824 and 1860.
no fruit, nor does the corpse of the hapless voyager, mouldering in an obscure grave, on the borders of a Western river, add flower to the wilderness.

Steamboats fell victim to human errors like collisions or boiler explosions. Snags, or submerged tree trunks, were especially notorious for piercing river craft and sending them to the bottom within a matter of minutes. Of all these fates, *Cist's Weekly Advertiser* estimated in 1852 that obstructions such as snags, sandbars, or rock ledges were responsible for over half of them.  

Attempts to improve the navigation of the Ohio River followed the logic of nineteenth-century notions toward government’s role in the economy. Following the Revolution, Americans were initially divided as to whether they wanted government to be a positive force in economic development, or a more liberal protector of private enterprise and competition. Although neither side won this debate in legislative halls, the failure of several state-funded internal improvement projects to adequately satisfy the “public interest” led to a preference for private initiative in prosecuting such endeavors by the 1840s. Politicians found it difficult to justify pledging taxpayer dollars for projects that would not benefit all citizens equally. Attempts to assuage those not connected to a canal or road led to costly extensions of these networks which oftentimes derailed the entire project altogether.  

Americans identified much more closely with the economic prospects of their state than with the nation at large. Expanding population across vast states like Ohio increased pressure for improved commercial linkages between communities and states. In a large country like the United States, the free and efficient flow of information was essential to the economic prosperity of the nation, and something which many Americans valued as a privilege tantamount to social mobility.  

Drumming up public support for projects like the Ohio and Erie Canal was much easier at the state level. When Americans proposed internal improvement projects in the early national period, they generally preferred the familiarity of state governments to the distant authority found in the federal government. At the state level, politicians could more effectively persuade their neighbors that a new road or canal would benefit them directly and was a worthy

---


investment of their tax dollars. However, when private enterprise and state governments could not adequately accomplish popular projects like removing Indians or establishing basic economic and social structures, Americans showed few qualms in requesting federal assistance to further their own interests. \textsuperscript{26} Unfortunately for applicants, the federal government’s coffers were quite shallow in the Early Republic. Nearly all federal revenue during that time derived from custom duties, not taxes. The experience in the Ohio Valley echoes a larger national trend where the most successful internal improvement projects took place under the direction of state government. \textsuperscript{27}

The federal government struggled financing internal improvements on national interstate highways such as the Ohio River because legislators could not agree on a balance between self-interest and a collective national interest. By the 1820s, the general public demanded national transportation networks that would connect the country and promote economic growth. At the same time, many Americans did not want to alter the role of the general government by creating a national bureaucracy which could depart from its role as a disinterested arbiter of the market. The potential for such an undemocratic body to descend into avarice and political favoritism would threaten the Union itself. Early nineteenth-century politicians questioned “energetic General Government” while simultaneously creating various nationally financed initiatives, particularly to develop the western territories. Americans envisioned these initiatives as enabling the natural forces of the market while abstaining from directing the economy. The resulting situation was what one historian has called “a government out of sight.” \textsuperscript{28} The federal government’s role entailed promoting the growth of the American economy without disrupting the natural market forces that classical liberal political economists identified as the source of social harmony. \textsuperscript{29} As with state internal improvement projects, federal support of public works

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{27} What I mean by success is this: between 1800 and 1850 the state of Ohio completed two major canals connecting the Ohio River with Lake Erie. During that same time, they were unable to find a solution for improving the Ohio River, the largest commercial artery in the entire state. Scheiber, \textit{Ohio Canal Era}; Brian Balogh, \textit{A Government Out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21-23, 31-34; Gordon S. Wood, \textit{Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 134-135.

\textsuperscript{28} Balogh, \textit{A Government Out of Sight}, 3, 114-118, 271-272

\end{footnotesize}
benefitted one group or region at the expense of another, only on a much larger scale. Federal funds expropriated for improving navigation on the Mississippi River or building a road in Maryland were not felt in New England. Federal appropriations for internal improvements were extremely controversial because they held the potential to upset the ever tenuous sectional harmony Americans so revered. The struggle to reconcile these concerns would not be settled until the centralization of federal power after the Civil War.  

Westerners along the Ohio River eventually entered into this political maelstrom at the federal level. The failure of private and state ventures to improve that interstate highway left them little recourse other then to appeal to the federal government by 1830. Much like the larger debate on the proper role of the national government in the economy before the Civil War, Westerners met mixed results with ultimately few clear solutions to their problems. These failures served to only further unite people in the Ohio Valley toward promoting their regional interest of improving the navigation of the Ohio River.

Private Initiative

Henry Clay’s 1817 speech in Congress was probably drawing on the failures of the first major effort to improve the Ohio in 1804-1805. The largest obstacle on the river was the Falls of the Ohio at Louisville, a series of limestone shoals that created rapids for two miles. Smaller boats could usually navigate the falls in high water, but larger steamboats always ran the risk of scuttling regardless of the conditions. During the Ohio’s lower stages, the falls became virtually impassable. River craft employed nearby residents in Louisville to guide them through these dangerous waters. Still, safe passage was not always guaranteed. In April 1807, the ships Rufus King and Tuscarora piled up on the rocks when trying to cross the falls, leaving the men on board “without a possibility of being relieved from the shore.” Westerners understood that a canal around the Falls of the Ohio would quicken the development of the Ohio Valley by increasing river traffic and enrich landowners and businessmen in the region.

31 Western Spy and Miami Gazette (Cincinnati), May 18, 1807. For an amusing allegory which explains the motives behind Louisivillians’ interest in keeping navigation around the falls inadequate see the “Negative Railway” in M. Frederic Bastiat, Popular Fallacies Regarding General Interests (London, 1846), 125-126.
Although Westerners wanted a canal around the Falls of the Ohio, they predictably disagreed as to who should profit from it. Benjamin Hovey, a land speculator from New York, set off a race to build the canal in 1804 by inspecting the falls following the suggestion of his friend Aaron Burr. Hovey’s visit to the region did not go unnoticed, and Kentuckians responded by incorporating the Ohio Canal Company in that same year. The Ohio Canal Company’s initial capital of fifty thousand dollars did not appear earnest because estimates of the cost of a canal ran in the several hundreds of thousands dollars. River interests outside of Louisville accused the Kentuckians of being primarily a body attempting to restrict canal projects on the Kentucky side by granting rights to men not serious about the endeavor. It was no secret that Louisvillians profited from the portage rates around the falls and were in no particular rush to alleviate this inconvenience for their neighbors. With the blessings of the General Assembly of the Indiana Territory and its governor William Henry Harrison, Benjamin Hovey’s Indiana Canal Company was incorporated in 1805 with an initial capital stock of one million dollars. The main sticking point between this company and their Kentucky competitors was over where the canal would be located. The Indiana Canal Company proposed building a canal on the Indiana side near Jeffersonville. The Kentuckians of the Ohio Canal Company did not want river traffic diverted north, and supported a plan to build a canal at Louisville. The stakes were high in this project, as the state which laid claim to the canal would reap a financial windfall from canal tolls and added river traffic.

Both the Indiana and Ohio canal companies claimed that the canal would be cheaper if built on their side of the river. These potential routes were rooted in ulterior motivations more than honest estimates. Benjamin Hovey initially thought the Louisville route would be the best, but “on examination I discovered such advantages on the opposite side, that I at once decided in favor of it.” These advantages are not enumerated. It is likely that Hovey was influenced by other river communities who stood to gain if they could deprive Louisville of its stranglehold on transportation around the falls. Hovey also may have thought that Louisvillians would be poor business partners because a canal might destroy or at least affect their lucrative portage business. Regardless, Kentuckians realized that their Indiana neighbors were serious about

building a canal, and gave the Ohio Canal Company greater powers in 1805, expanding their capital to half a million dollars. They also aggressively advertised their proposal to outside investors, labeling their efforts a “great national object” which was of interest to “the commerce and agriculture of this state, and the western country generally.” Kentuckians still wanted to control their canal. The new charter limited the amount other states and the federal government could invest in the Ohio Canal Company. Pennsylvania and Virginia were allowed to invest at maximum thirty thousand dollars, while Ohio, New York, and Maryland were limited to twenty thousand dollars.\(^{35}\) Such peculiar limitations hint at Kentuckians’ suspicion of river rivals in Ohio and mercantile interests in Baltimore in favor of those in Philadelphia. Jared Brooks’ 1805 survey of the falls put to rest much of the debate by conclusively showing that erecting a canal on the Kentucky side of the river was in fact cheaper. Despite the thoroughness of Brooks’ work, it could not change the fact that he and his supporters were Louisville men tied to the Ohio Canal Company. Even after a canal was completed in 1830, schemes to bypass Louisville by building a canal on the Indiana side of the Ohio River would continue through the Civil War.\(^{36}\)

All of these efforts to build a canal were for naught, as the Indiana and Ohio canal companies failed to attract enough investors. Both groups sought financial support from the federal government, and both were rejected. The Indiana Canal Company petitioned the federal government for a contribution of twenty-five thousand acres of land in the Indiana Territory which could be auctioned off for the benefit of the company. Hovey and his associates had a good chance for support since their company was based in a federal territory and not a state. The federal government stood to gain directly from the canal as well, since its construction would lower transportation costs to the west and increase demand for federal land in the territories. But Congress shot down the proposal since the company had not “been regularly organized & incorporated” when their petition was submitted. Scandal later doomed the Indiana Canal Company when stockholders Aaron Burr and James Wilkinson were suspected of treasonous activity with Spain in 1805, the former being formally accused. Although the government eventually acquitted Burr, the damage had been done. Tainted by scandal, government support

\(^{35}\)Littell, Statute Law of Kentucky, 3:259, 265-266.
\(^{36}\)For more on trade networks in the Ohio Valley prior to 1830, see Kim Gruenwald, River of Enterprise; Proceedings of the managers of the Ohio Canal Company: at Louisville, the 11th day of September (Lexington: Daniel Bradford, 1805); Plans of the survey and details of a canal on the Indiana side of the Falls of the Ohio, No. 2, 32nd Cong., 2nd sess., February 15, 1853, Sen Doc. 42.
was out of the question for Benjamin Hovey and his fellow investors. The Ohio Canal Company met a similar fate, albeit without the intrigue. In 1806 the Kentucky Legislature petitioned the federal government for assistance in their project. Congress lauded their efforts, but declined funding since it had been “already pledged” for “other purposes.”

This early episode in the history of navigational improvements to the Ohio River illustrates a point that Westerners accepted only with reticence: they would need to work together if they wanted to improve safety on the river and ensure prosperity for themselves and their region. Help from the federal government was not coming. The urgency of this situation amplified considerably after steamboats were introduced to the Ohio River in 1811. This new technology revolutionized transportation, and within one decade the amount of goods being shipped via western rivers to New Orleans doubled. After the conclusion of the War of 1812, rivers were important as ever to Westerners. With their borders secure from Native Americans and Britain, Americans were anxious to reap the wealth from the development of the western country. They just needed a group which possessed the necessary ambition and capital to pull off an internal improvement project that would unleash the full commercial potential of the Ohio River.

**State Initiative**

In January 1817 help arrived from government, albeit at the state level. The brainchild of Cincinnati merchant Jeremiah Neave, Ohio’s General Assembly made a proposition to the legislatures of Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Virginia, and Indiana “to unite in the improvement of the navigation” of the Ohio River. The plan called for each state to appoint a commissioner which would meet with others in Pittsburgh and inspect the river to the falls at Louisville. These commissioners would then determine which improvements would be most expedient, then every state would pay for them proportionally. The chances for the proposition to succeed were boosted by President Madison’s veto of the Bonus Bill two months later in March. It seemed

---

37 Benjamin Hovey, *Petition from Benjamin Hovey to the United States Congress*, January 17, 1804, First American West Collection, Filson Historical Society; *Congressional committee statement regarding Benjamin Hovey’s petition*, January 28, 1805, First American West: The Ohio River Valley, 1750-1820, Filson Historical Society; *Report of the committee appointed on the tenth ultimo, of the memorial of the legislature of Kentucky* (Washington, 1806), 4.

38 Haites, *Western River Transportation*, 124.
that the internal improvement question had been settled in Washington: financing transportation projects would be the domain of states. Ohio jumped headlong into the spirit of inter-state cooperation for prosecuting internal improvements, that same year pledging support “as far as its resources will justify” to New York Governor Dewitt Clinton’s plan for the Erie Canal.³⁹

All states responded enthusiastically, except Indiana. The Indiana Legislature did not provide an explanation as to why they did not appoint a commissioner. It is likely that they did not want to consent to a report that would conclude that building a canal around the Falls of the Ohio would be cheaper on the Kentucky side. The commissioners appointed by the remaining states were Westerners familiar with the Ohio River and sympathetic to the concerns of those reliant on that highway. Their inspection of the river took place in August-September 1819. A miscommunication with Kentucky’s representative John Adair prevented him from joining, but his previous knowledge of the terrain allowed him to assent to the conclusions made by the other commissioners. The timing of their inspection could not have been more propitious, as the river had been unusually low for much of 1819, almost entirely suspending eastern and southern commerce in the Ohio Valley. People were understandably frustrated, leading one Kentucky newspaper to write “even if the necessary expenses of the undertaking [of improving navigation on the Ohio River] were twice as great as the estimated amount, we believe the people of Kentucky, have too much good sense to complain of so necessary (we might say profitable) an appropriation of their money.”⁴⁰

The report of the commissioners was eagerly anticipated by western states, and their conclusions did not disappoint. From Pittsburgh to Louisville the commissioners determined that the removal of myriad rocks and snags that haunted river craft all could “be removed at an expense relatively small.” As Indians feared, the commissioners estimated the cost of building a canal at the falls at Louisville to be twice as expensive in Indiana, and were “unanimous in giving a decided preference for the Kentucky side.” Despite these projections of low cost, the commissioner’s report fell short when delineating concrete plans to pay for these extremely important, yet modest projects. The commissioners complained that appraising the

⁴⁰ Louisville Daily Advertiser, October 29, 1819; The commissioners were the following: John Adair (KY), Samuel Blackburn (VA), Edward W Tupper (OH), Walter Lowrie (PA); Kentuckian Reporter [Lexington], January 26, 1820.
expenses of removing obstructions and improving navigation proved “to be exceedingly
difficult,” reporting that “no estimate they have yet made, has satisfied themselves.” The 1819
report on improving the Ohio River ended up suggesting that each state appropriate ten thousand
dollars to agents who would expend these resources where they were most needed. These vague
propositions belied the copious records and measurements taken by the commission. The
cooperation of Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Virginia in 1819 resulted in the production of
clear and indisputable figures that demonstrated that the investment in removing obstructions on
the Ohio River would result in substantial dividends for all parties; much more so than in
comparison to other internal improvement projects. But the inability to detail costs left the
project vulnerable to attack in state legislatures.41

State governments approved the findings of the Ohio River commission; however that did
not mean that money would be appropriated as they suggested. When the report reached state
legislators in 1820, the United States was gripped in the aftermath of the Panic of 1819, the first
major financial crisis the country had faced since the 1780s. Legislators hardly were in the mood
to spend money. Some argued that such a paltry investment on the major transportation channel
in the region was just the recipe to deliver the western country from the economic straits it faced.
A Mr. Ferguson in the Kentucky Senate made light of internal improvement projects currently
underway in the eastern states, asking his peers “should we always remain asleep while these
efforts are making to draw our trade from its natural channel?” Ultimately funding was not
granted because the state legislatures of Ohio, Kentucky, Virginia, and Pennsylvania balked. All
the states verbally pledged to support the plan, but only if another state committed first.
Kentucky passed an act in 1820 titled “that an appropriation ought to be made to improve the
Ohio river [emphasis added]” with Senator Shannon remarking that he “would support if other
states would pledge money.” River communities along the Ohio must have appreciated the
sentiment. Unfortunately it did not translate into anything tangible. The spirit of state
cooperation of three years earlier had disintegrated.42

41 Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Ohio (Columbus: P.H. Olmsted, n.d.), 18:150-154; for comparison to other internal improvement projects, the state of Ohio pledged sixty thousand dollars of the state treasury and created new property taxes to pay for the Ohio and Erie Canal in 1825, Salmon P. Chase, ed., The Statutes of Ohio and of the Northwestern Territory, Adopted or Enacted from 1788 to 1833 Inclusive (1834), 2:1474.
42 Argus of Western America [Frankfort, KY], November 2nd, 1820; Kentucky Senator Richard Johnson requested federal assistance for the project in 1820 and 1822, both times being rejected, Alexandria Gazette [Alexandria, VA], April 20, 1822.
Western states’ failure to work together led politicians to only support river improvements that benefitted their own state. Since the Ohio River serves as a boundary for almost its entire course, many of the obstructions listed in the 1819 report went unaddressed. Most states took action as Pennsylvania did in 1821, appropriating fifteen thousand dollars for removal of obstructions on the Ohio River from Pittsburgh to Wheeling. Although much of the improvements were conducted on the Ohio-Virginia section of the river on Pennsylvania’s dime, the potential diversion of traffic from the National Road in Wheeling, Virginia to Pittsburgh via steamboat was in Pennsylvania’s interest, not necessarily Virginia or Ohio’s. Former Ohio governor Thomas Worthington, a major proponent of ambitious internal improvement initiatives, seemed to have given up on cooperative projects on the Ohio River as well. In 1822 he wrote an article that used much of the same rhetoric as that used in 1817 (namely low investment and high return), except his attention was on improving the navigation of the Scioto River, not the Ohio. Such legislation was more likely to pass because rivers like the Scioto lay entirely within one state, and benefitted river communities as well as farmers on the interior.43

River communities understood by the late 1820s that only federal assistance would improve the Ohio River. Private enterprise failed to attract enough funds or interest to clear the largest impediments to navigation like the Falls of the Ohio. The Louisville and Portland Canal Company formed in 1825 finally succeeded in bypassing the falls, but required significant federal bailouts in 1826 and 1828 to prevent it from failing. Twelve years after its completion, stockholders opted to sell their shares to the federal government in 1842 rather than continue to operate the canal. Just as private companies lacked sufficient capital, state governments lacked the political will to improve the condition of river cities. The cost of removing obstructions in the Ohio River certainly would have benefitted the entire western country, but because such expenditures would also benefit others outside their jurisdiction, no state was willing to take the lead when it came to funding. River communities’ attempts to improve the Ohio River in the early nineteenth century show that they preferred solve the problem locally, either through

---

43 Washington Review and Examiner [Washington, PA], May 8, 1822; Archer Butler Hulbert, The Cumberland Road (1904), 72-73; Supporter and Scioto Gazette [Chillicothe, OH], May 8, 1822; Kentucky ended up turning their intention to the improvement of the Kentucky River, like the Scioto in Ohio, it lies entirely within the state, see Frankfort Argus, December 17, 1823.
private enterprise or state government. Only after expending these options did river communities aggressively seek the assistance of the federal government.\textsuperscript{44}

\textit{Lobbying the Federal Government}

If river communities gained nothing else in their efforts to improve the navigability of the Ohio River in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, they at least realized that the federal government was the source of their salvation. Many had lost faith in their own state governments. Cincinnatian James Hall lambasted state legislatures for being “influenced by selfishness, by personal considerations, and by that very natural species of patriotism which looks first at home, and \textit{only} at home.” State politicians were focused only on “objects of public utility within their own boundaries.” And therein lay the problem. The Ohio River was itself a political boundary legally defined as a common highway exempt from tolls or taxation.\textsuperscript{45} States therefore struggled to find direct financial benefits from improving the river. Frustrated by past failures and riding the mounting national popular pressure for public works projects, Westerners began in the late 1820s to define improvements on the Ohio River as among the “most important...public works of national character.” It was in the interest of river cities to view the Ohio as a national highway, not a sectional one. By identifying themselves as Americans, not Kentuckians, Virginians, or Ohioans, Westerners stood the best chance to gain the support of the “General Government,” and secure individual prosperity.\textsuperscript{46}

As time would show, the apportionment of federal funds for improvements to the Ohio River would have much to do with who lived in the White House. In 1824, that man was James Monroe. Like his predecessor James Madison, Monroe was wary of creating a permanent fund for internal improvement projects. Yet in his 1822 veto of a bill putting tolls on the Cumberland Road, he articulated that he would support internal improvements of a national character so long as they were approved by the regions affected by such proposed projects. With this opinion known, Congress passed the General Survey Act in 1824, which empowered the president to

\textsuperscript{44} Leland R. Johnson, \textit{The Falls City Engineers: A History of the Louisville District, Corps of Engineers, United States Army} (Louisville District: Corps of Engineers, 1975), 66, 72.
\textsuperscript{45} James Hall, \textit{Statistics of the West: at the Close of the Year 1836} (1836), 36: \textit{An ordinance for the government of the territory of the United States, northwest of the river Ohio}, Article IV, July 13, 1787.
\textsuperscript{46} Larson, \textit{Internal Improvements}, 141-144; \textit{Ohio Monitor} [Columbus], May 19, 1830, the article is a communication from Cincinnati.
appoint the Corps of Engineers to survey potential and existing routes for national highways. Since surveys had already been drawn for the Ohio River, the federal government granted its first apportionment for improvements on western rivers that year.47

Federal assistance manifested itself in several ways on the Ohio River. The first federal projects in 1824 removed sandbars and blasted stone ledges to create a deeper and more navigable channel. The “snag” (submerged trees) problem was also addressed. Congress offered a one-thousand dollar premium to whoever could engineer a craft which could effectively remove such obstructions. Henry Shreve’s “snag-boat” design in 1828 eventually prevailed as the most popular method. Shreve’s boat had twin hulls, and would extricate submerged trees by charging them at full speed. A beam on the snag boat would either break the tree on impact or loosen it from the riverbed, where it could then be raised and dismembered. Nicknamed “Uncle Sam’s Toothpullers,” these boats were capable of removing snags weighing over seventy-five tons.48

Federal power was more visible on the Ohio River than in other parts of the country. The federal government bought shares in the Louisville and Portland Canal Company, eventually becoming sole owner by 1842. Apart from navigation, the federal government was particularly active in guaranteeing safety for rivergoers. Marine hospitals funded by the national government dotted the banks of western rivers, providing rivermen healthcare free of charge. Federal programs even got onto the steamboats themselves. As public outcry rose following the growing number of steamboat explosions, the federal government passed laws to regulate and inspect steam boilers in 1838 and 1852.49

Despite the ambitious scope of these projects, Westerners tied to the Ohio River saw federal involvement as entirely insufficient. Funding for improvements was sporadic and dependent on an administration friendly to their interests in Washington. For example, snag boats only operated when the money was available. Once funds dried up they lay idle onshore. People travelling the Ohio were still at the mercy of its seasonal depth changes. Low water levels exposed new obstructions and still possessed the capability to entirely halt commerce in

48 Hunter, Steamboats on the Western Rivers, 193-196.
the Ohio Valley. Residents in Pittsburgh reminded Congress in 1836 that “the whole river is the channel of a continuous and connected trade…The interruption at a single shoal or bar is an interruption of the whole navigation.” If we judge the success of federal policies on western river networks before the Civil War on their effectiveness in reducing accidents, Paul Paskoff has conclusively shown that federal polices were successful. But river communities did not see it that way. For them, the loss of life and property was still unacceptably high. Westerners were ungrateful because they understood that river networks required a comprehensive improvement system, not intermittent appropriations and attention. 50

River communities’ cooperation with the federal government usually foundered on the topic of internal improvement policy. Just as the Ohio’s peculiar location between states stymied earlier attempts to improve that highway, the peculiar nature of preserving navigation on the river clashed with the strict interpretation of the Constitution held by American presidents. Rivers were by nature more fickle than canals or roads, requiring constant vigilance of water levels, shifts in the riverbed, snags, and the development of new sandbars. Andrew Jackson’s administration supported river improvements that addressed all of these obstructions to commerce, but his interpretation of the Constitution ruled out the remedy river cities sought. In his 1830 veto of an act to fund the Maysville Road, Jackson argued that because the proposed road lay entirely within the boundaries of Kentucky, it was the responsibility of the state, not the federal government, to fund such an enterprise. Three years later, another act to improve the Wabash River in Indiana was rejected on similar grounds. It was in this veto message, much like Monroe’s 1822 Cumberland Road veto, that Jackson outlined what he deemed appropriate federal internal improvement projects. Jackson supported “improvement of our harbors” and “the removal of partial and temporary obstructions in our navigable rivers” because they ensured “the facility and security of our foreign commerce.” The Wabash veto did not excite passions as it should have throughout the Ohio Valley, most likely because the federal government continued to finance improvements on the Ohio and Mississippi. However, Jackson had shifted the role of the federal government in an important way. Whereas Monroe deemed projects of “national character” within the bounds of suitable federal assistance, Jackson added the element of foreign

50 Memorial of the Directors of the Board of Trade at Pittsburgh (1836); Paskoff, Troubled Waters, 164-188; Haites, Western River Transportation, 108-110.
commerce to the criteria. This was a troubling development for river communities connected, but still far upstream from ports of foreign exchange on the ocean.\textsuperscript{51}

James Polk’s 1846 veto of the River and Harbors Bill followed through on the implications of Andrew Jackson’s interpretation. Like his predecessors, Polk feared the development of a “general system” of internal improvements that would grant financial support to certain regions on the basis of politics, not constitutionality or fairness. Such a development, Polk feared, could serve to drive apart the Union. Ports on the Great Lakes and major rivers were “unconnected with foreign commerce” and “not needed for the protection and security of our Navy and commercial marine.” A clear line needed to be established to prevent the potential for political graft and misappropriations, and Polk drew it squarely on whether a port was involved directly with foreign commerce. Federal funds for improving western river networks like the Ohio were consequently withdrawn.\textsuperscript{52}

Westerners of both Whig and Democratic persuasion were irate upon learning of Polk’s veto. The two major parties had very different opinions on the role of the federal government, but when it came to improving the river, the Ohio transcended politics in river towns. Failure to pass the River and Harbors Bill deprived them of almost all the funding to improve safety on inland waterways like the Ohio River. The Whig leaning \textit{Cincinnati Gazette} wrote that the veto could “never be forgotten by the western people. Every boat that is snagged, every one that gets fast on a sand bar, every article that is lost, and every life that is sacrificed in consequence will forcibly remind us of this destructive blow aimed by a Locofoco President against our prosperity.” Democrats in the West were slower to condemn Polk, blaming the veto on the inclusion of “other schemes” in the River and Harbors Bill not of national character and unworthy of federal funding. According to his supporters, Polk approved western river appropriations but had to veto the bill as its passage would have rewarded “logrolling” and sanctioned an unconstitutional extension of federal power. Local Democrats attempted to calm their neighbors, claiming that “the vast interest of Western navigation has not been lost sight of in the pother of partisan harangues.” They believed that once the controversial elements of the bill were removed, funding would once again be restored. Democrats were correct in that

\textsuperscript{51} Ben Perley Poore, ed., \textit{Veto Messages of the Presidents of the United States with the Action of Congress Thereon} (Washington, 1886), 148; Craig Thompson Friend, \textit{Along the Maysville Road: The American Republic in the Trans-Appalachian West} (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005).

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Veto Messages of the Presidents of the United States with the Action of Congress Thereon}, ed. Ben Perley Poore, 188-189.
financial assistance from the federal government would return, as it did in 1852, but it was more infrequent and less money than it had been in the past. Whigs wanted the federal government to be more involved in promoting economic development. Democrats on the other hand feared that such an active federal power would result in corruption at the highest levels of government and threaten personal liberties. Regardless of these differences, Westerners on both sides of the aisle believed that improving the navigation of the Ohio River was the domain of federal government.  

As the *Cincinnati Gazette* predicted, accidents went up on western rivers by one third in the next five years after Polk’s 1846 veto. Apart from the needless loss of life, the profligate destruction of property raised the cost of doing business in cities reliant on the river trade. After decades of struggle, river communities seemed to be still at square one in 1850. The number of steamboats and the amount of cargo on the Ohio River had grown at an astonishing rate in the previous fifty years, and so too had the communities along its banks. Canals that cut hundreds of miles into the interior had been built and vast swaths of forests cleared for cultivation. But a few submerged trees and shifting sandbars continued to confound Westerners. This situation spurred river communities to work together to amend this problem right through the antebellum period.

A fine example of the vitality of the “river interest” in the Ohio Valley was their participation in two separate “river conferences” in the 1840s. The first held in Memphis in 1845, concerned the “development of the resources of the West and South.” Two years later in 1847, a North-Western River and Harbors Convention met in Chicago in response to Polk’s veto. The Memphis Convention addressed the regional interests of the Mississippi Valley and the Gulf of Mexico, while the Chicago Convention was primarily composed of people living in the Upper Mississippi Valley and the Great Lakes. Both meetings ostensibly claimed to be nonpartisan, although unsurprisingly Democrats dominated Memphis, while prominent Whigs

---

53 *Cincinnati Gazette*, October 2, 1846; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, December 2, 1846, August 3, 1847; Haites, *Western River Transportation*, 96; when funding returned in 1852, Whig Millard Fillmore was president, but Democrats controlled both the house and senate, meaning that river improvements did not strictly follow party or sectional lines.

54 Paskoff, *Troubled Waters*, 214-215; Daniel Webster observed in 1847 that western states, regardless of party, were for internal improvements: “The truth is, that of the two great parties which have divided the country, one has been for Internal Improvements, and one against them; but in this latter party individuals have been found…from the Western and North-Western States, who have voted for such improvements, and thereby created a majority in their favor in the House of Representatives, against the general voice of their party, and against the wishes and vetoes of the executive government.” William Mosley Hall, *Chicago River-and-Harbor Convention: An Account of its Origin and Proceedings* (1882), 121-122.

like Abraham Lincoln attended Chicago. Some historians have identified the River and Harbors Convention in Chicago as evidence of the American economy dividing along a North-South axis. According to this interpretation, the northern economy developing around the Great Lakes wanted an active role for the federal government in their economy, while the South fought against the expansion of federal power at every step. This argument overlooks two things. First, southerners at the Memphis convention, chaired by none other than John C. Calhoun, also sought federal assistance in improving western river networks and ports on the Gulf Mexico. Second, the North-South dichotomy fails to explain why people hailing from Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois attended both conventions. The Ohio River tied people along its banks to the economies above and below them. Rather than choose between groups, people in the Ohio Valley clung to a sense of being Western that was recognized by others as well.

Although both the Memphis and Chicago conventions supported river improvements, their arguments legitimizing such appropriations differed dramatically. The Memphis River Convention in 1845 physically took place on steamboats built in Cincinnati. John Calhoun opened the convention by presenting his opinion on the subject:

> We may safely lay down as a rule, that whatever can be done by individuals, they ought to accomplish: whatever is peculiarly with the province of States they should effect: and whatever is essentially within the control of the General Government, it should accomplish. I believe the…uninterrupted navigation of these inland seas…is within the peculiar province of the General Government.

The convention later endorsed Calhoun’s assertion by resolving that the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers were “indispensable [sic] to the defence of the country in time of war, and essential also to its commerce.” Commerce may have been their focus, but this Democrat-dominated conference justified federal assistance primarily in the language of national security.

Uproar following Polk’s 1846 veto led to calls in the northwest for a River and Harbors Convention the following year in Chicago. Delegates from the Great Lakes dominated the convention (hardly a surprise considering the host city selection), still river interests traveled

---

57 Missourians also attended both conferences. Although my focus is limited to the Ohio River, it is important to recognize that the Missouri River tied residents to the economies north and south of them as well.
58 *Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 22, 1845.
north to attend. Just like Memphis, the Chicago Convention resolved that the Constitution “was mainly designed to create a government whose functions should and would be adequate to the protection of the common interests of States” that “could not be maintained by the action of the separated States.” The North-Western Convention then cited section eight of the first article of the Constitution which gave the federal government the power to regulate commerce “among several States,” which they believed included “internal trade and navigation.” Any trade that crossed state boundaries was interstate commerce, and by definition the domain of the General Government. This interpretation went farther than the resolutions of the Memphis Convention, which defined objects worthy of federal support as being of sufficient national character and essential to the defense of the nation. For strict constructionists like James Polk, federal assistance on the Great Lakes had little to do with national defense, and did not promote the Constitution’s larger goal of forming “a more perfect Union” since it only benefitted one region of the country. Regardless of these disagreements, the conventions in Memphis and Chicago both supported federal appropriations for improving the navigation of the Ohio/Mississippi River network. Westerners consequently attended both conventions. But because Whigs and Democrats could not find common ground in reconciling the forces of personal interest with the constitutionality of common national interest, neither side got what it wanted. This left Westerners frustrated and nonplussed as to how such a bipartisan and popular issue as river improvements lacked the political force to be enacted.

Westerners along the Ohio continued to unite through the first half of the nineteenth century to improve the navigability of the river. The failures of government and private enterprise to deliver an acceptable level of safety on western rivers before 1860 encouraged the development of a distinct river interest. Small scale federal initiatives alleviated some of the distresses for men of the western waters, but their effectiveness apparently did not succeed in placating them. Not until after the Civil War and the centralization of authority in the federal

---

59 Representation at the Chicago Convention from the Mississippi Valley is fairly sparse. Since the convention was primarily concerned with seeking improvements for the Great Lakes, it should be less of a surprise that fewer Westerners attended since river interests were not the main focus as they were in Memphis. For a roll call of the delegates to the Chicago Convention, see William Mosley Hall, *Chicago River-and-Harbor Convention: An Account of its Origin and Proceedings* (1882), 52-68; Emerson W. Gould, *Fifty Years on the Mississippi, or, Gould’s History of River Navigation* (1889), 313-314; Hall, *Chicago River-and-Harbor Convention* (1882), 81-82.
government would serious improvements be made on the Ohio River.⁶¹ Although naturally connected by water, this riverine community was unnaturally divided by political structures and boundaries set in place during the United States’ formative years. Such a predicament thwarted most of its attempts to receive fair recognition in state or national government.

CHAPTER 2: Commercial Connections

Of all the scenes in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the image of Eliza jumping across the icy Ohio River into freedom is the most vivid. But another scene, albeit much less dramatic, more accurately reflects conditions along the river. After purchasing Uncle Tom, the slave trader Dan Haley boarded “on one of the Ohio boats. It was the commencement of his gang, to be augmented, as the boat moved on, by various other merchandise of the same kind, which he, or his agent, had stored for him in various points along the shore.” Stowe is ambiguous as to whether the “Ohio boat” refers to the river, or the owner of the craft. Nonetheless, the scene gives a window into the interconnected nature of river commerce. Even if the boat’s owner called Kentucky home, there was more than a good chance that the captain, pilots, passengers, or non-human merchandise originated in a free state. For principled radicals like Stowe, participation of any kind in the river trade equated to tacit complicity with slavery. Avoiding the taint of the peculiar institution in the Ohio Valley was not as simple as crossing a river.62

Historians have long explained the economy of the antebellum United States dichotomously: the North characterized by wage labor and industrialized capitalism, the South wallowing in a traditional agrarian economy based around slavery. Yet in places like the Ohio Valley where these two systems met, distinctions between “Northern” and “Southern” economic practices are not readily apparent. This can be seen in that people living directly along the Ohio River identified themselves as “Western” through the first half of the nineteenth century. Westerners primarily viewed the river as a highway tying their region together which also enabled the commercial enterprise that gave places like Cincinnati and Louisville reason to exist. Experiences in this corner of the United States demonstrate that Americans, regardless of their state affiliation, were more than willing to profit from slavery if given the opportunity. Slavery may have been present in particular sections of “the West,” but for most people it was hardly an issue which prevented them from doing business or making friends just across the way in Kentucky or Ohio.63

The heartbeat of river communities was the mercantile community that thrived on the commerce which moved along the Ohio River. The vast majority of early settlers in Kentucky and Ohio left their homes in the east for the opportunity to claim cheap land. But settlement in the interior reaches of these states could not be easily accomplished without a reliable commercial network. Farmers required a system which could transform the fruits of their labor into marketable commodities. Simultaneously, significant demand existed among these settlers for the manufactured goods available in the eastern states. As a result of these factors, a considerable number of residents in river communities oriented themselves toward mercantile enterprise in the early nineteenth century. Ideally located on the major transportation artery in the region, river cities became the entrepôts whereby agricultural goods left, and manufactured goods entered, the new American west.

Travelers on the Ohio often remarked on the human diversity and bustling commerce of river towns. As early as 1817, Englishman John Palmer commented on Cincinnati’s “excellent supply of goods from the East and West Indies, Europe, and of the produce of their immediate neighbourhood.” This was especially surprising for Palmer since the area had been the domain of “wild beasts and savages” less than forty years prior. Immigrants, Indians, free and enslaved Africans could all be seen in these river ports. Such a scene stood in sharp relief to the bulk of time spent on the Ohio. River travelers commented on stretches where human habitation could not easily be discerned for miles, a romanticized image which belied the activity sailing, drifting, or steaming around them. People preferred to plant their farms away from the river, since the geography carved by the roiling waters ill-suited agricultural pursuits. It was at the points where river towns sprouted that farmers from the interior met the steam and flatboats of the river.64

While the travelers marveled at the sublime natural elegance of the “la belle riviere,” as the French called the Ohio River, similar sentiment rarely extended to the American towns along its banks. One traveler in 1838 suggested that “were one desirous of exhibiting to a friend from the Atlantic shore a picture of the prominent features which characterize commercial proceedings upon the Western waters, or indeed of Western character in its general outline...he could do no better than to place him in the wild uproar of the steamboat quay.” The obstreperous atmosphere of river cities, replete with intoxicated rivermen, zealous Methodist revivalists, and Irish

---

draymen astounded foreign observers. This frenzied lifestyle even extended into polite society. Englishman William Bullock observed with amusement the “industrious habits” of Cincinnati’s mercantile elite, who rapaciously devoured their food, returning “immediately to their stores, or counting-houses, with a better relish for business than is usually found after the enjoyment of the bottle.” People visiting a river town spent most of their time describing shops, burgeoning factories, or a port choked with river traffic. Visitors recognized the essence of what river communities were: centers of commerce.65

The fortunes of river communities literally rose and fell with the ebb and flow of the river. Population growth experienced in these places was a direct corollary to the rising importance of the river trade. Cincinnati and Louisville’s populations approximately doubled every ten years from 1800 to 1860. The only other city in the country to undergo such incredible growth in the early nineteenth century was New Orleans, the “great in and outlet of the Mississippi valley trade.”66 All three of these cities lay astride the same western river network, and it is no coincidence that they shared similar experiences. The advent of the steamboat galvanized commercial enterprise on rivers, drastically accelerating the pace of development in the Mississippi Valley. Rivers were the dominant trunk routes in the western country through the 1850s, and the population centers along that highway owed both their existence and success to river traffic.67

The intrastate rivalry between Louisville and Lexington exemplifies the growing importance of the river trade in the early nineteenth century. Centrally located in Kentucky’s Bluegrass, Lexington first emerged as Kentucky’s premier commercial center in the 1780s. But following the War of 1812, hemp prices collapsed and the influx of cheap European manufactured goods delivered a potent double blow to Lexington’s economy. The timing could not have been better for Louisville. As Lexington wallowed in economic stagnation, Robert

66 US Federal Census; Charles Cist, Cincinnati in 1841: Its Early Annals and Future Prospects (Cincinnati, 1841), 36; Louisville’s growth always paled in comparison to Cincinnati’s population, partially because the latter was twice as large. Reasoning for this is usually laid at the feet of slavery’s presence in Louisville. Although this certainly was a factor, it overlooks Cincinnati’s propitious location near the fertile Miami Valley, it being the southern terminus of the Miami and Erie Canal, and the Little Miami Railroad. Louisville was more closely tied to commerce, and was consequently more vulnerable to financial panics and bank collapses.
Fulton and Robert Livingston debuted the steamboat on western rivers in 1811. In response to the increasing river traffic that followed this technology, regional mercantile networks gravitated toward the Ohio River. Louisville attracted much of this commercial activity since it was fortuitously located on the Falls of the Ohio, the greatest natural obstacle to river vessels between Pittsburgh and New Orleans. During high water, intrepid steamboat pilots would try and “shoot” the falls, often putting their ship, cargo, and passengers in great peril. But river-goers of a more sober disposition elected to forgo the falls by disembarking in Louisville and transferring their wares onto other craft on the other side of the obstruction. Between 1810 and 1850, Lexington’s population increased by eight thousand people; while its river rival Louisville grew by forty-two thousand souls. By 1850, Louisville overcame Lexington as the most populous city in Kentucky, a distinction the city still has yet to relinquish.68

The people moving to river cities were largely entrepreneurs, immigrants, or laborers looking to capitalize on the growing river trade. The mercantile class was the lifeblood of communities like Louisville and Cincinnati. Although a minority of the overall population, their connections with farmers miles into the interior and bankers in cities across the mountains in Philadelphia fueled the development of the western economy. Cincinnatian James Hall proclaimed in 1848 that the prosperity of the western states was owed “chiefly to the commercial class,” who “control its resources, direct its energies, and in a great degree form the moral standard which regulates the transactions of the whole people.” The prodigious growth of river communities well into the 1850s shows that the majority of economic activity of the Old Northwest and Upper South funneled to the Ohio River. With so much pork, cotton, hemp, ginseng, and tobacco dumped at the river’s edge, it was not uncommon for some of it to float to the other side.69

Yankee expatriate John Corlis was one such man who would not let a river, or the laws and customs of another state interfere with his aspirations to make a buck. A native of Providence, Rhode Island, he initially made his living as a merchant in the China trade. Corlis ran into some misfortune when two of his ships were seized by the Spanish off South America in 1799 and 1805, resulting in a protracted legal battle lasting two decades. This, in addition to the

disastrous effects of the British embargo before and during the War of 1812, convinced Corlis that his future prospects would not be best served in New England. Corlis moved his family to Bourbon County, Kentucky in 1815 to start a new life on a tobacco plantation, hiring out slaves in the process. Always the entrepreneur, Corlis became a tobacco merchant and used his New England connections to open a distillery. Like other merchants of the time, he sent his tobacco to foreign markets via rivers, utilizing the meanderings of the Kentucky, Ohio, and finally Mississippi rivers to New Orleans.  

In 1827, John Corlis visited Cincinnati and was so impressed with the place that he decided to embark on a business venture there. Foreseeing the Queen City’s future success, he wrote business associates in Rhode Island that “it will not only be the largest commercial town of the western country, but will also be a great manufacturing place.” The high demand for cotton products in the west convinced Corlis that opening a mill in the city would be wise investment. From his observations, trade accounted for the vast majority of business activity in Cincinnati, but despite this, prices for manufactures were higher than eastern cities since few industrial enterprises existed in the west. Cincinnati had only two cotton mills, and according to Corlis, they made an exceptional profit importing Tennessee cotton. He warned his Rhode Island friends that “the day will come perhaps not very soon when the people west of the mountains will furnish themselves with all the articles required for their consumption cheaper than you can furnish them in N[ew] England.” Corlis intended to beat out the competition and get a head start developing industry in a region ripe for investment.  

The major obstacle to John Corlis’ cotton mill scheme was not the method of labor in Ohio, but its price. People moving west could make more money in either commercial activity or gain personal independence by purchasing cheap land. Industry required time and skill if it was to develop into a profitable enterprise. Transportation costs and the fidelity of currency fluctuated considerably in the western states; such omnipresent tremors and uncertainties could ruin a manufacturer in a matter of weeks. Mercantile endeavors on the other hand could adjust to price discrepancies brought about by poor navigation on the river or a series of bank collapses.

---


But as Corlis noticed in 1827, Cincinnati was growing at such a rate that industry could be supported by a home market. Mill owners claimed Cincinnatians “would be glad of the employment” were another textile factory to open in the city. Corlis attributed the high price of wage labor to “the principal [sic] of Liberty and equality, these people prefer both for themselves & children.” Westerners were not averse to working in factories, so long as it paid better than other opportunities in commerce or agriculture.

Slave owning Kentuckians were not opposed to the free labor system developing in Ohio or other free states, as it often catered to their own interests. John Corlis’ willingness to invest in enterprises across the river bears witness to this. He even boasted that it would be easy to get some of his nearby “Bourbon [County] friends” to join him in his cotton mill venture. Corlis and others realized that Cincinnati was fast emerging as the source of the cheapest labor in the West. If money was to be had in industry, scrupulous Western entrepreneurs, whether in free Ohio or slave-holding Kentucky, would be most prudent to look first there.

Corlis’ interests north of the Ohio did not end in Cincinnati. Even before Corlis moved west, he was involved in land speculation. Like his involvement with the China trade, it was not entirely successful, his most spectacular failure being his participation in the notorious Yazoo land scandal in the 1790s. Undeterred by these events, Corlis continued to speculate in land mostly near his Bluegrass home. But sometimes it crossed the Ohio River. In 1838, near the end of his life, Corlis owned a tract of land north of Marietta, Ohio. In his correspondence with Ohioan John Oliver concerning his holdings, Corlis apologized for failing to personally inspect the property. The river which connected them was too low for travel.

On the Ohio side of the river dwelt another immigrant to the west, the Englishman Edmund Dexter. He did not earn his bread from the land like Corlis, but was instead one of the many merchants residing in the river port of Cincinnati. Apart from the spectacular wealth Dexter attained later in life, he was a fairly typical Western merchant. He got his start in the late 1820s in a grocery firm with Arthur H. Harvie on Lower Market Street, less than two blocks from the public river landing. Dexter eventually struck out on his own by 1831, specializing in

---

72 Daniel Aron, *Cincinnati: Queen City of the West* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992), 31-33; Corlis to Brown & Ives, Nov. 27, 1827, Corliss-Respess Papers, Filson Historical Society.
73 John Corlis to Brown & Ives, November 27, 1827, Corliss-Respess Papers, Filson Historical Society.
74 John Corlis to John O. Cram, October 18, 1838, Corliss-Respess Papers, Filson Historical Society.
importing liquor and rectifying whiskey. Like many other merchants along the Ohio River in the 1830s, Dexter processed a local agricultural product and sold it to customers from New Orleans to Pittsburgh.

Edmund Dexter rectified whiskey, a profession that no longer exists today. Demand for his services arose from farmers’ proclivity to transform their surplus corn crop into white whiskey. Colloquially known as “moonshine,” “white lightning,” or other variants, the alcoholic content of this beverage was inconsistent, and generally too potent and tasteless for the general public. Rectifiers like Dexter purchased barrels of this distilled swill from farmers, streamlined its alcohol content, added flavors, then sold the final product. Dexter got his supply of moonshine from nearby farmers in Ohio and across the river in Kentucky. In addition to this, he imported other liquors generally from the eastern states for distribution in the western country. Before the barrels even rolled onto the steamboat, their contents could have already been harvested by free and enslaved laborers alike.

Information gleaned from Edmund Dexter’s 1834-1836 bill of lading book challenges the notion that people viewed the Ohio River as a distinct border, or that the emergence of canals dramatically altered the propensity of Ohioans to trade with slave states. The speed and cost of river transportation made it the ideal method of shipping for Western merchants like Dexter. Natural waterways held the distinct advantage of being toll free highways, which was not the case with canals, turnpikes, or railroads. Also assuming favorable traveling conditions, the speed of water transportation significantly outpaced land travel. The earliest steamboats averaged around fifteen miles per hour, while stagecoaches averaged around five. Merchants’ preference for river transport is evident in Dexter’s bill of lading book. Shipments are marked in bursts,

---


77 *Northwest Ordinance*, July 17, 1787, Article IV “The navigable waters leading into the Mississippi and St. Lawrence, and the carrying places between the same, shall be common highways, and forever free”; Settling on a ceteris paribus speed for overland or steamboat navigation is difficult since improvements in technology changes over time and terrain varies for each route. But to appreciate the remarkable decrease in travel time the steamboat brought to the west compare: an overland roundtrip from Cincinnati to New Orleans in 1802 took two hundred days, while one of the earliest steamboats, the *Aetna*, traveled roughly the same distance in one-fourth the time in 1817 see Erik F. Haites, James Mak, and Gary M. Walton, *Western River Transportation: The Era of Early Internal Development, 1810-1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 15; Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers*, 17-19.
suggesting that the river was high enough for steamboats to ply the waters. In 1835, Dexter transacted nearly half of his steamboat business within the span of two months.

The bill of lading book corresponds with the natural rhythms of Ohio River, where spring and autumn were usually the periods when the river was highest. The busiest weeks for Dexter’s company were usually in the March-April and August-September. The amount of activity in a river city was directly tied to the depth of the river. Newspapers in Louisville and Cincinnati ran daily reports on the various stages of the river, measuring the water levels to within an inch from Pittsburgh to St. Louis. A low river hindered mercantile activity to the extent that the prices of imported commodities could skyrocket in the span of weeks, or even trigger riots if the river went through a particularly rough dry spell. Although Dexter’s lading book omits records of his overland trade, it is certain that high water ensured lower transportation costs and larger profits. His frenetic activity in the spring and autumn months reflect that.78

Canals transformed commerce on the Ohio River, especially after the completion of the Ohio and Erie Canal in 1825. The transportation network created by artificial waterways dramatically shortened the time it took farmers to send their goods to commercial centers along the Ohio River, Great Lakes, or east coast before it spoilt. Edmund Dexter utilized these networks to send one third of his liquor to Portsmouth, Ohio, the southern terminus of the Ohio and Erie Canal. The Miami and Erie Canal was almost certainly used as well by Dexter, but is omitted from the lading book since its termination in Cincinnati precluded the need for steamboat transportation.

Canals did not dwarf the river trade, as some historians have suggested, they instead only increased the amount of goods flowing up and down the Ohio. Between 1834 and 1836, Dexter not once marked an inland canal town as the destination of his liquor. He preferred to sell it to distributors like Charles Damarin in Portsmouth, Ohio (whose town motto, interestingly enough, is “Where Southern Hospitality Begins”). Canals created more suppliers and customers for Edmund Dexter and other merchants in river towns. Until railroads emerged as the quickest way to send goods east in the 1860s, the Ohio-Mississippi River network was the most efficient way to get from to here to there in the West. As both major canal terminuses on the Ohio River lay

78 From March 2 to April 3 and from August 31 to September 26 forty-three percent of Dexter’s bills of lading were written for the year 1835, Edmund Dexter Bill of Lading Book, 1834-1836, Cincinnati Historical Society; In 1841 the Ohio River remained abnormally low for much the year, sparking riots in Cincinnati by August. River depths were reported by western newspapers usually very early in the paper, or immediately under the “commercial” section. See Cincinnati Daily Gazette, June 5, 1845.
in Portsmouth and Cincinnati, the existence of canals only supplemented the economic position of river cities by directing canal traffic into the river trade upon which they ultimately depended.79

The destinations for approximately two-thirds of Dexter’s shipments were Virginia, Kentucky, or other port of calls in the south. His customers were generally wholesale grocers dealing in “country produce.” Men such as Charles Damarin upriver at Portsmouth bought products from specialized merchants like Dexter, who then in turn sold it to local customers or smaller regional suppliers further inland. The breadth Edmund Dexter’s rectified whiskey reached is not known, but it can be inferred by its sale to wholesale grocers on both sides of the Ohio that his liquor seeped deep into the soils of states like Kentucky and Ohio. Connections further inland may have been diluted by distance, but the bulk of these products were processed and exchanged by merchants in river cities, and these connections were extremely personal and strong.80

Edmund Dexter became a very prosperous man, and owed much of his success to suppliers and customers on the Kentucky side of the river. By 1840 he had built one of the most impressive mansions in Cincinnati. Its grandeur, according to an early twentieth-century local historian, “was a pleasant reminder of the good old antebellum days of Cincinnati.” Despite his prominence in the community, Dexter remained very private. Personal records do exist however, from Joseph Mersman, an apprentice in Dexter’s liquor business from 1847-1849. A plucky German immigrant, Mersman devoted the vast majority of his diary to measuring his progress toward becoming a wealthy and cultured man. Ruminations on political or moral matters rarely penetrate his diary. Mersman’s commentary on his experience working in Dexter’s rectifying business is equally terse, but an interesting and telling pattern emerges. For example, on October 9, 1848 he wrote “Business inclined to be dull Weather beautiful, and River falling again. of

79 Edmund Dexter Bill of Lading Book, 1834-1836, Cincinnati Historical Society. Although Dexter probably used the Miami and Ohio Canal, it is very unlikely that it was to the extent of the Ohio and Erie Canal. In 1836, the Miami and Erie only reached Dayton, Ohio, while the Ohio and Erie provided transportation from Portsmouth to Cleveland. The assertion that canals supplemented the river trade instead of replacing it is supported by statistical evidence which shows that both the number of vessels and total tonnage on inland rivers peaked in the mid-1850s. If canals replaced the importance of river transportation, the opposite would be seen, see Haites, Western River Transportation, 21-25.
Course produce will sink with it.” Although business suffered, Mersman later delighted at the fact that slow business gave him ample time for “private affairs.” The river remained low into the next week, raised transportation costs, and consequently ate into Dexter’s profit margin. Mersman noted on October 17th that despite fairly steady business at their Cincinnati shop, shallow waters had grounded the flow of imported liquor to a complete halt. Relief from the river did not arrive, prices continued to rise, and the next week’s business was unsurprisingly slow. Mersman capitalized on this free time to study, play his guitar, and recover from a hangover. The observations of Edmund Dexter’s apprentice, although prosaic, reveal the extent to which the Ohio River continued to dictate the lives of those who lived along it well into the 1850s.  

The river not only determined business activity in a river town, but also the behavior and priorities of ordinary citizens. The Ohio River at a low stage meant more time to spend with friends, learn an instrument, or study French. High water interrupted these moments of repose, increased the amount of hours people like Mersman worked, lowered costs, and by consequence filled pantries. By 1850, the population of Louisville and Cincinnati had grown to the extent that more industries were supported by home markets. They were not as dependent on access to eastern and European markets for the supply of basic manufactured goods. Canals, roads, and even nascent railroad lines that did not exist thirty years before also alleviated their isolation from the east. Yet the Ohio River still endured as the best method of carrying on commerce. If people had turned their back on the river, they would have put an end to their daily habit of commenting on water levels and steamboat rates. People living along the Ohio River knew that it more than anything else controlled the rhythms of their commercial and personal lives.

Apart from business conducted between individuals, the commercial and financial institutions established in river communities were composed of people from both free and slave states. A final glimpse into Edmund Dexter’s riverine life exposes this reality with his involvement in the Canal Insurance Company. Men deeply invested in the river trade recognized the necessity for insurance to combat the uncertainties inherent in transportation on the western waters. Steamboats all too often foundered on shifting sandbars, sank after being pierced by submerged trees, or exploded from faulty boilers. Insurance was a big business in Cincinnati, the

---

amount of annual marine risks taken in Cincinnati alone exceeded three million dollars in 1831. Edmund Dexter was a founding member of the Canal Insurance Company, established in 1836. Although he did not personally own any steamboats, he most certainly insured the cargo he shipped in their berths.⁸²

Very little remains in terms of records from the Canal Insurance Company, but advertisements in Cincinnati newspapers announcing stockholders meetings list its board of directors. In 1837, Dexter served on that board. Canal Insurance was based in Cincinnati, and federal census records from 1840 show that many board of directors lived in the city. From the names that could be reasonably determined from census data, in 1837 approximately one-fourth of the board members lived in slaveholding states. Although the majority of directors came from Ohio, men such as Jonathon Rowan or Justus Vairin called places like Louisville and New Orleans home. Regardless of state, almost all board members lived in a town located on a stream which eventually drained to New Orleans.⁸³

Most insurance companies in Cincinnati operated on the “Mutual Plan” system. People insured through these companies shared profits with other members in proportion to the premium they paid on either their steamboat or merchandise. Most importantly, companies like Canal Insurance protected merchants from the ever-present hazards of the river trade by covering losses within the premium each person paid into the company. Directors of these companies, men like Edmund Dexter, set rates of coverage and determined which types of risks could be reasonably covered. Insurance companies from as far away as Connecticut and Georgia advertised in Louisville and Cincinnati’s newspapers, but it was more common to find local insurance outfits in the western country. Businessmen who owned steamboats or transported their merchandise via the inland rivers especially needed protection because the capricious nature of the Ohio and Mississippi proved to be extremely unpredictable and hazardous to profit margins. Insurance firms like the Kentucky and Louisville Mutual Insurance Company flatly refused to offer marine protection because it was too costly. Under such conditions, merchants in Western cities from

⁸² Wallace v. Ohio Insurance Company, Ohio Reports 4, 236.
⁸³ Hunter, Steamboats on the Western Rivers, 364-367; Cincinnati Daily Gazette, June 15, 1837; 1840 US Federal Census. Of the 21 men listed as members of the Canal Insurance Company’s board of directors, only two could not be identified without certainty: Justus Vairin was a wholesale and commission merchant in New Orleans, Louisville Daily Journal, February 6, 1839.
Pittsburgh to New Orleans banded together to create insurance companies capable of shouldering the exigencies of river transport necessary for their commerce.  

The Canal Insurance Company was headquartered in downtown Cincinnati, adjacent the Merchant’s Exchange and the Miami Exporting Company. These vital commercial organs in the mercantile community lay directly opposite the public river landing. The economic pulse of much the western country in the early nineteenth century could be discerned by walking the length of nearby Front Street. At the Merchant’s Exchange, locals and river-goers converged to trade stocks and speculate on prices largely determined by the height of the river only a few feet away from them. Next door was the Miami Exporting Company, a collective of merchants and farmers formed in 1803 by men in Ohio and Kentucky. The combined effort of local farmers and salesmen, the company considerably mitigated individual risk by purchasing and selling in bulk. The Miami Exporting Company also extended credit to Westerners by offering stocks which could be reimbursed with agricultural produce. Like the formation of insurance companies, these local institutions were the result of cooperation among Westerners adapting to the idiosyncrasies of trade in a river city.

The greatest manifestation of mercantile unity in a river city was its Chamber of Commerce. Cincinnati merchants founded such an organization in 1829 “to promote and facilitate the commerce of the city—to examine and adjust such matters in dispute amongst merchants and others as shall be submitted to them—and to establish and render uniform the commercial usages of the city.” Headed by the very citizens who dominated commerce in these entrepôts, the Chamber of Commerce was one of the most powerful political bodies in Cincinnati and Louisville. The actions of Cincinnati and Louisville’s board between 1830 and 1850 reflect the most pressing concerns of merchants not only in those cities, but the whole western country.

With little federal involvement in currency during this era, the mercantile community in commercial hubs like Cincinnati needed to be constantly on guard for faulty bank notes. In one instance in 1840, Kirkland Yardley remonstrated to the board that “that the notes of the

---

84 An example of the heightened risk of marine insurance in comparison to other forms of protection is evidenced by The Kentucky and Louisville Mutual Insurance Company, who advertised that “No merchandise or marine risks are taken, thereby greatly increasing the safety of insurance in this office.” *Louisville Daily Journal*, August 24, 1841.
86 *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, April 6, 1829.
Louisville savings institution, have increased in this community to an unreasonable [amount], from which it is evident that a new effort has been made to palm them on the public.” Apart from representing the distress which merchants of this era constantly felt regarding the fidelity of bank notes, this event also gives a picture of who was primarily trading in a river city. Suspicious Louisville currency floated up the Ohio River into Cincinnati because people who had stopped over in Kentucky were spending quite a bit of money in other river cities. Despite emanating from Kentucky, it is also apparent from the currency’s initial popularity that Buckeyes held few qualms exchanging currency from another Western city. This regional attitude is evident in a petition sent by the Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce to Congress in 1841 seeking relief from currency depreciation. Instead of representing themselves as citizens of Ohio, they called themselves men of “the Great Valley of the Mississippi,” whose place of business was “the West.”

The other major issue present in Cincinnati and Louisville’s Chamber of Commerce meetings was an unwavering determination to establish better communication lines between other men of commerce. Merchants were intensely concerned with communication networks because their success was intimately tied to working in concert with the constant price fluctuations in the West. Louisville newsman George Prentice wrote,

> Eastern papers appear to be surprised, that we of the West manifest so much interest in the continuance of the Express mails. If the ordinary mails in the East were like those in the West, travelling frequently at the rate of not more than 30 or 40 miles a day and sometimes failing altogether for days and weeks in succession, our Eastern friends would probably learn to appreciate the Express mails as highly as we do.

A daily mail packet running between Louisville and Cincinnati beginning in 1832 greatly benefitted the merchants in both communities. When responding to a report from the Postmaster’s Office to initiate a mail line between Cincinnati and New Orleans in 1841, the Chamber sarcastically appreciated “the interest felt by at least one department of the General Government, in the promotion of Western interest, which they believe have been too long overlooked or disregarded.” Four years later in 1845, an ever parsimonious federal government

87 Cincinnati Daily Gazette, December 29, 1829; January 14, 1840, May 20, 1841, Organization of Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, October 1839 to July 1863. Cincinnati Historical Society. Louisvillians boasted of having the most desired bank notes in the western country, see Louisville Public Advertister, July 10, 1841.

88 Louisville Daily Journal, February 26, 1839; Louisville’s Chamber of Commerce was sensitive to the concerns of other western merchants, lowering storage and commission rates in 1833 following crop failures. Daily Louisville Herald and Commercial Gazette, February 13, 1833.
proposed decreasing mail service from Louisville to St. Louis from five days a week to three. Consistent with their earlier positions, the merchant community of Cincinnati firmly opposed it. Although the aim of Cincinnati and Louisville’s mercantile community was to appropriate as much advantage to their city as possible, policies of expanding river communication and regulating currency benefitted them both. It was this congruency of interest, namely to turn a profit, that held them together.89

River cities along the Ohio River may have held similar economic interests and identified themselves as “Western” through the 1850s, but that does not necessarily mean they got along. Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, and smaller Ohio River hamlets competed with one another for the business of the people who drifted by them. Louisville and Cincinnati’s rivalry was particularly intense. Both cities underwent tremendous growth in the first half of the nineteenth century, but Louisville was always about half the size of Cincinnati. Residents of Louisville were very sensitive of this inferiority. In reply to assertions that Louisville’s prospects had significantly dwindled in the four years since the Panic of 1837, Shadrack Penn listed the exports of the city and defiantly exclaimed, “we believe we as greatly exceed Cincinnati as many persons think she exceeds us.” Despite its smaller size, riverboats almost always needed to stop at Louisville either to transfer its goods across the falls, or go through the locks of the Portland and Louisville Canal. The operators of those locks were known to charge boats originating in, or destined for Cincinnati higher rates than vessels from other upriver cities. Needless to say, people from these two cities were hardly on cordial terms.90

Competition among river cities was firmly rooted in establishing commercial superiority in the region, but it also was about prestige. A proposed Western federal armory, which would have been the third after those located in Harper’s Ferry, Virginia and Springfield, Massachusetts, was either to be in Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, or Louisville. As can be expected, each city propounded its particular advantages to the federal government. Rumors suggesting Pittsburgh led the race elicited an interesting response from Louisville: “We hope that if the new armory is to be located at Pittsburg, it will not be called a Western armory. Pittsburg is not in the West, it is only a frontier town of one of the Eastern States.” Fortunately for Louisville and

90 Louisville Public Advertiser, July 10, 1841; Thomas L. Connelly, “Neo-Confederatism or Power Vacuum: Post-War Kentucky Politics Reappraised,” Register of the Kentucky Historical Society 64 (October 1966): 263.
Cincinnati, Pittsburgh was not selected as the site for the armory. No place was; the proposal never materialized.\textsuperscript{91}

Sometimes the manifestations of this rivalry were more jovial. After fire consumed most of Pittsburgh in 1845, Cincinnatians received a communication from the residents of Louisville boasting that they had raised more money for the victims. After listing the major contributors for the relief of Pittsburgh, the Kentuckians taunted their cross-river rivals with “we will beat you Cincinnati, if you don’t mind.” It is important to realize here not that river cities resented their neighbors, but that they competed with one another because they were fighting for the same things. Each city wanted to be the premier commercial center on the Ohio River, arguably the greatest thoroughfare in the antebellum United States. Their similarities led to dispute, not their differences.\textsuperscript{92}

When it came to the issue of slavery however, differences between Ohio and Kentucky were much less amicable. The potential for the “dire curse” of slavery to explode along state borders was immense. Yet in the river cities that straddled the border between free and slave states, the nature of this difference was much less acute. Foreign observers noted that Louisville was quite industrialized for a “Southern” city, while Cincinnati, although in a free state, frequently played host to slaveholders, sometimes even with their slaves alongside. The very nature of the commercial interaction created by the Ohio River meant that citizens in river cities, whether in a slave or free state, were constantly in contact. As long as accommodation and syncretism were the watchwords, the mercantile community in this riverine zone could prosper.

The abolitionist movement was the single greatest threat to comity and the sense of regional Western identity in the Ohio Valley. Events such as the trial of John B. Mahan, who was tried and executed for aiding fugitive slaves from Kentucky into Ohio, fueled animosity and distrust across the Ohio River. In the political sphere, the state governments of Ohio and Kentucky tried to assuage fears by working in tandem to preserve property rights for slave owners south of the river. Kentucky sent a delegation in 1839 to Columbus who successfully strengthened Ohio’s fugitive slave law. Despite these efforts, Ohio abolitionists continued to abhor slavery’s proximity to them, and persisted in abetting slaves fleeing from their masters. Incensed Kentuckians responded as a group from Kenton County did by forming a “recapture

\textsuperscript{91} Louisville Daily Journal, September 7, 1841.
\textsuperscript{92} Cincinnati Daily Gazette, April 22, 1845.
association” in 1841. These armed thugs traveled into Ohio, barged onto private property, and used force to requisition their slaves. Even Ohioans that supported slavery detested these vigilantes.\(^{93}\)

Cassius Clay’s short-lived abolitionist newspaper the *True American* bears witness to how river communities navigated this highly charged issue. A cousin of Henry Clay, Cassius was born into Kentucky’s slave owning aristocracy. The Panic of 1837 and Kentucky’s slow recovery from that episode convinced him that slavery was an economic bane on his state and country. Clay was notoriously forthright about his views and knew his way around a bowie knife to back it up. In 1845 he had the temerity to publish an abolitionist newspaper in Lexington, the heart of Kentucky’s slaveocracy. Only two days after the first issue, family friend James Speed Smith warned Clay’s brother Brutus that “Cassius will be killed if he remains here & continues his paper.” After tolerating the inflammatory rhetoric of the *True American* for two months, prominent Lexington slave owners took a more peaceful approach. They quietly broke into Clay’s office and shipped his printing press to Cincinnati. Undeterred, he continued to write in Lexington, corresponding with editors in Cincinnati who printed and distributed the *True American*.\(^{94}\)

Clay’s determination persisted, but the success of his paper did not. In an effort to win over more Kentuckians to his cause and convince incredulous slaveholders of his patriotism, Clay volunteered for the Mexican American War in 1846, leaving the *True American* in the hands of his friend John Vaughn. Clay’s service in the war alienated many of his northern supporters who viewed the conflict as little more than an effort to expand slavery into Mexican territory. The paper had become a financial disaster shortly after Clay’s enlistment. In the paper’s death throes aid arrived from an unlikely source: Louisville.

Anti-slavery Kentuckians realized the national significance of having an abolitionist newspaper in a slave state. It also helped that continuing Clay’s message was in the economic interest of many prominent men in Louisville. Fearful of falling ever more behind Cincinnati in

---


\(^{94}\) Clay was accosted in 1843 and 1849 by proslavery politicians. In both cases, Clay killed or seriously injured his assailants with his trusty bowie knife, but not before suffering bullet and stab wounds in the process. Cassius Marcellus Clay, *The Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay* (1886), 82-84, 184-185; “Cassius M. Clay, ‘Lion’ of Whitehall Some Unpublished Letters Of and About,” *Filson Club History Quarterly* 31 (January 1957), James Speed Smith to Brutus Clay, July 12, 1845, 15-16; *True American*, September 30, 1845.
population and prestige, Louisville residents like Judge Fortunatus Cosby and *Louisville Journal* editor Thomas Hopkins Shreve believed the elimination of slavery would be an economic boon for the city. Louisvillians smarted when visitors like painter Miner K. Kellogg attributed a perceived lack of enterprise and moral turpitude in the city “mostly to their holding of slaves.”

No other place in Kentucky was exposed to the free labor system to the extent Louisville was. Customers and business partners lived across the river in Indiana, or stopped in their city when travelling down the Ohio River. Likewise, Louisvillians witnessed the operation of a slave-less society when they walked the streets of their Western upriver rivals Cincinnati and Pittsburgh. For sure, the great success of these places did not go unnoticed in Louisville. Economic gain more than moral conviction motivated certain circles in Louisville society to advocate for an end to slavery in Kentucky.

The abolitionists, or “friends of Freedom” in Louisville offered the *True American* and its editor Robert Vaughn a new home if funding could be found. In a move quite uncharacteristic for a slave state, anti-slavery Kentuckians sponsored Vaughn, albeit discreetly, to travel to the eastern states to solicit financial support. The newspaper was rechristened *The Examiner* to avoid the negative stigma Cassius Clay endeared in the previous two years. From 1847 to 1849 this abolitionist paper ran in Louisville, advocating an end to slavery in Kentucky. Much of *The Examiner*’s support came from northern states, and its popularity waned with the failure to pass an emancipationist amendment at Kentucky’s 1849-1850 constitutional convention. Antislavery sentiment was hardly universal in the city, but unlike Lexington, Louisville tolerated the existence of *The Examiner*. The reasoning for this had everything to do with Louisville’s proximity to the Ohio River trade. Unlike Louisville, Lexington remained enmeshed in the slave system. The threats of abolitionists like Cassius Clay could not be countenanced by the slaveholding elite. In a more cosmopolitan, commercially oriented river city like Louisville, they could.

On the “free” side of the river, the white residents of river cities were notorious for their contempt of blacks. A fugitive slave in 1827 described his experience in Cincinnati thus: “I

---

96 S.H. Dodson, ed., *Diary and Correspondence of Salmon P. Chase* (1903), Salmon P. Chase to Charles Sumner, November 26, 1846, 2:112; *The Examiner*, June 19, 1847, December 8, 1849. Harold D. Tallant, *Evil Necessity: Slavery and Political Culture in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002),121-130, 160. By looking at the arrivals to hotels announced in Louisville and Cincinnati’s newspapers, it is very evident that a high proportion of guests to the city were from other river cities from Pittsburgh to New Orleans.
found every door closed against the colored man in a free State, excepting the jails and penitentiaries, the doors of which were thrown wide open.” Slaves fleeing from their masters flocked to river cities so as to avoid detection by slipping into the crowd. A Mr. Chelton advertised in 1839 a reward for the capture of a slave Sam, who he strongly suspected would “make for Louisville or Maysville, for the purpose of getting to a free State.” Whites across the river hardly welcomed people like Sam. Cincinnati newspapers continued to publish reward notices for escaped slaves so long as the institution was legal in other states. Racial tension in Cincinnati often spilled into open violence in the streets, as it did in 1829, 1836 and 1841. One of the major impetuses for these disturbances originated in paranoia on the part of whites concerned that a growing free black population would threaten their job security.97

It is true that leaders of the abolitionist movement lived in Cincinnati, Salmon P. Chase and Harriet Beecher Stowe among them. Yet for every abolitionist in a river city, there were many more ordinary merchants like Edmund Dexter. His opinions on the slavery question are not known. But what is known is that he had suppliers and customers on the other side of the river. Not only did merchants in all river cities profit directly and indirectly from the slave system as Dexter did, but their business across the Ohio River in itself contributed to its perpetuation. The paradoxes inherent in Western identity are laid bare in the Cincinnati Daily Gazette’s reaction to Cassius Clay’s first running of the True American in 1845: “[Slavery] is so involved with our interests and feelings—so interwoven with our social fabric—so mixed up with our politics, and personal considerations—that the wisest approach it with anxiety, and the best and bravest discuss it with doubt.”98 Even if people in places along the Ohio River opposed slavery on moral grounds, to loudly proclaim the evils of the institution or physically intimidate abolitionists was bad for business. Products almost entirely of the commercial traffic on the Ohio River, cities like Louisville and Cincinnati were about business first and foremost; and consequently found that moderation and accommodation best suited their riverine interests.

98 Cincinnati Daily Gazette, June 10, 1845.
CHAPTER 3: Laboring “between liberty and servitude”

When Scotsman Alexander Mackay ascended the Ohio River in 1847, he observed that while “one side presented every appearance of industry, enterprise and activity, a sleepy languor seemed to pervade the other.” Like many nineteenth-century travelers to the Ohio Valley, Mackay attributed this difference to the existence of slavery in Kentucky and Virginia, and the lack thereof on the north side of the river. Such conclusions seemed to confirm biases observers already held on slavery, and were rarely grounded in hard facts. On the contrary, a day’s work in river towns along the Ohio River looked very similar regardless of the state or riverbank one visited in the early nineteenth century. The largest population hubs at the time, river towns were the commercial and manufacturing centers in the Ohio Valley. River communities performed similar functions for the local economy, processing and exporting primarily agricultural foodstuffs arriving from the interior.99

Although the laws that defined labor across the Ohio River differed, the manifestation of that labor was not dissimilar. Nineteenth-century Cincinnati typified the exponential growth occurring in other Northern cities. However, Louisville also experienced that phenomenon simultaneously. While Cincinnati’s experience was typical, Louisville’s is an aberration, since few other slave-holding antebellum cities enjoyed such growth. The Ohio River’s role in directing commerce to these places is the reason for their similar expansion. Like the working conditions of eastern border cities such as Baltimore, labor practices were on a continuum on the Ohio River. Employers interchangeably used slaves and other poor whites to turn a profit in the West. Although there is a gross distinction between slavery and free labor, the working conditions of slaves in Louisville and the Irish in Cincinnati were not worlds apart. This congruence did not extend inland, but where slavery met freedom on the Ohio, these differences were oftentimes only nominal.100

Despite the legality of slavery on only one side of the Ohio River, the lived experience for blacks working in river towns did not differ dramatically. Slaves enjoyed a greater degree of

99 Alex Mackay, The Western World or, Travels in the United States in 1846-47 (London: 1849), 3:77; Travelers’ impressions of the Ohio River were usually rooted in a belief in the superiority of free labor, oftentimes with little knowledge or exposure to Southern agricultural practices. John Majewski, Modernizing A Slave Economy: the Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 45-49.
mobility in an urban setting, but still held little power over their own lives. Free blacks enjoyed this latter freedom, but little else. River towns in free states severely proscribed black access to certain professions, leaving them few options other than to find work not that dissimilar to the slaves on the other side of the Ohio. White and black laborers only performed the most menial jobs together. In places like Cincinnati, white mechanics and tradesmen acted to preserve the “dignity” of their labor by using violence and the law to deny blacks upward social mobility, placing them in a social position not far removed from the slaves across the river.\textsuperscript{101}

Labor practices between free and slave states along the Ohio River demonstrate a congruence of opinion in the region that transcended political boundaries. These sentiments were rooted in kindred cultural traditions and an analogous economic environment. Many of the early settlers in the Ohio Valley came from Virginia and the Carolinas, bringing their slaves with them. Kentuckians protected slavery in their inaugural 1792 state constitution, and although an outspoken minority continually pushed to rid the state of the “evil necessity,” slavery would endure in the Bluegrass State until the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. The Virginians who crossed over to the north side of the Ohio River initially had less choice in regards to the slavery question since the Northwest Ordinance banned the practice in 1787. Yet this did not stop Virginians from trying to replicate the court structure and social hierarchy of their native state there. Upon reaching statehood, Ohio banned slavery in its inaugural state constitution in 1803. But Illinois did not, and slavery persisted illegally in Indiana through the 1830s. Pro-slavery agitation in southern Illinois frequently devolved into open violence, most spectacularly in 1823 when a mob burned down the state house in Vandalia. The existence alone of a debate on the slavery issue in the former Northwest Territory evinces a desire on the part of many white settlers to mimic the practices of southern states, or at the very least to keep blacks in a subservient position.\textsuperscript{102}

The nature of labor on either side of the Ohio River was largely determined by geography. Too cold for crops like cotton, people in the Ohio Valley focused on growing foodstuffs and other products in demand in the Deep South. Kentucky’s shorter growing season


precluded the planting of most lucrative cash crops upon which the legitimacy of the slave system was generally predicated in contemporary slave societies. Similar geography led to Kentucky and Ohio’s economies exporting mostly the same agricultural goods that required processing or rendering before they could be marketed. Ideally located on the quickest conveyance out of the region, river cities like Louisville and Cincinnati became the nodal points whereby products left the Ohio Valley.

Kentuckians turned to hemp, corn, and tobacco as viable exports. Across the Ohio River in Ohio, the Miami Valley produced immense amounts of corn, rye, wheat, and barley. Farmers often found it more profitable to use their crops as feed for pigs, which could be slaughtered and packaged nearby and sold downriver. The pigs and farmers of the fertile Miami Valley followed the sloping terrain created by the Little and Great Miami Rivers to the Ohio. The growing town at the river’s edge was called Cincinnati. Whether in Kentucky or southern Ohio, farmers in both places grew foodstuffs marketed in growing eastern cities and southern states primarily engaged in cotton cultivation. Some of the Ohio Valley’s produce fed plantations in places such as the West Indies as well. The hemp grown in Kentucky may not have been edible, but the ropes and bags they created were used by slaves to store and transport baled cotton. In essence, the Ohio Valley was intimately tied to the slave states below them. Thomas B. Stevenson wrote agriculturalist Adam Beatty in 1841 that prices were falling in Kentucky and also for “such rivals as Ohio, [Indiana], Ill., Mo., & Tenn.” These states were rivals because they grew similar things. People in the Ohio Valley were merely taking from the land what it would give them. Since Kentucky and Ohio were in such proximity to each other, it is no surprise that the land gave them similar crops.103

Although Louisville and Cincinnati gained very different reputations in the early nineteenth century, their exports were largely the same. The slaughterhouses and pork packing industry in Cincinnati earned the city international renown and the nickname Porkopolis. Louisville was better known for being a source of hemp and tobacco, and among other things, being smaller than Cincinnati.104 But a comparison of the exports from these places produces a

103 Ira Berlin, Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8; Daniel Aaron, Cincinnati, Queen City of the West 1819-1838 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992), 21; Thomas B. Stevenson to Adam Beatty, November 23, 1841, Beatty-Quisenberry Papers, Filson Historical Society.
104 Evidence of its international reputation, an Austrian visitor wrote, “Da gibt es auch eine Menge Schlachthäuser und Fleischmagazine, so Gelchhäuser, weswegen Cincinnati auch Spitznamen Porkopolis trägt.” Berichte der
different picture. Both cities shipped a large quantity of flour, whiskey, bacon, and tobacco downriver. Relative to population, Louisville and Cincinnati exported equal amounts of flour, whiskey, and pork. The produce of river cities reflected the types of things being grown around them. By looking at Cincinnati and Louisville, we can see with minor variations that people in the Ohio Valley were cultivating primarily corn and wheat. This raw material was then transformed into exportable commodities such as salt pork, bourbon, and flour. Instead of being the dividing line between two worlds, the Ohio River was the center of a regional agricultural economy.105

| EXPORTS BY CITY (in barrels)106 |
|-------------------------------|----------------|---------|---------|
| Louisville 1833               | Population in 1830 | Flour    | Pork    | Whiskey* |
|                              | 10,341            | 71,865  | 6,837   | 4,458    |
| Cincinnati 1831              | 24,831            | 125,000 | 17,000  | 30,000   |
| %                             | 41.6              | 57.5    | 40.2    | 14.9     |

*Louisville’s whiskey exports two years later in 1835 tripled to 14,643 barrels, or 48.8% of Cincinnati’s 1831 production

Toiling in the Fields

Comparable agricultural exports did not likewise translate into comparable attitudes toward labor in the fields of the Ohio Valley. Yeomen farmers north of the Ohio River were proud of their personal independence. The constant visibility of slavery immediately to their south must have put this reality into especially sharp relief for them. Consequently, field hands in free states were sensitive to performing labor usually associated with slaves. When farmer John David attempted to introduce hemp to Ohio in 1842, he encountered these prejudices.

Leopoldinen Stiftung im Kaisertum Oesterreich (Vienna, 1853), 5:116; Louisville Public Advertiser, July 10, 1841.

105 This information is taken from available city directories. The years compared are 1831 for Cincinnati and 1833 for Louisville. For this particular calculation, see Cincinnati Directory and Advertiser for 1831 (Cincinnati, 1831), 200; G. Collins, The Louisville Directory for the Year 1836 (Louisville, 1836).

106 Ideally I would have preferred to have compared the cities during the same year, but finding this information at the city level is inconsistent and spotty. Comparisons of other products are omitted because they were minimal, or more likely that statistics were not available for both Cincinnati and Louisville. For sources see note 7. It is important to note that Louisville’s 1833 statistics are located in the 1836 city directory. Compilers got their information from the local chamber of commerce, or from their own estimates. It is hardly authoritative, but a solid approximation.
David experimented earlier with growing hemp and tobacco in southern Ohio, reporting that hemp would “compare with any I have seen in Ky.” Despite the promise of these findings, he had a difficult time convincing nearby farmers of its feasibility. Many of the immigrants to southern Ohio were from “the Northern States” and knew “nothing about the culture” of either tobacco or hemp. David reported that incredulous northern farmers “say to prepare the hemp that is the cutting and rotting and breaking will be two [sic] much expensive to make it profitable as we have no Slaves to preform that work.” To this claim, David retorted that it was utter “nonsense.” He explained that “we can get the best of Farm hands for ten to $12 per month in Ky and a good white hand can do more labour than a black one. The hire of a black hand in Ky is usually I think from 9 to $10 [per] month in Ky and the hirer clothed [sic] and [pays the] physicians bill.” Further compounding this situation, David noted that employing free labor could be limited to the seasons when their labor was required. Slave hires lasted the entire year. Maintaining such extended stretches of involuntary servitude ate into profits.107

John David’s experimentation with hemp and tobacco took place in Georgetown, Ohio, almost a stone’s throw from the Ohio River. His attempts to alter the mode of “cultivating the soil” on the north side of that river reflect both the similarities and challenges to agricultural practices in the Ohio Valley. There was no reason why the loamy soils of southern Ohio could not support the crops grown south of the river. David cited the ever important factor of river levels as one of the main reasons why Ohioans should diversify their agricultural production, noting that “hemp Tobaco & wool…will bare shipping while corn wheat pork & beef will not in a low stage of water.” Based on estimates in 1842, hemp per acre would fetch approximately $48, while an acre of wheat would command $50 at market. Hemp’s advantage was clear once shipping rates to New Orleans, even during the periods of high water, were taken into account. David’s belief that “a good white hand can do more labour than a black one” also reflected a common attitude in the Ohio Valley that free labor was better suited to the agriculture in the region.108

108 John S. David to Adam Beatty, May 3, 1842, Beatty-Quisenberry Papers, Filson Historical Society; Evidence of strong anti-slavery presence in the Ohio Valley is seen in a letter between Elijah Phister and Adam Beatty of Maysville, KY. In discussing the prospects for a new editor for the local newspaper, Phister wrote “the truth is, the anti slavery sentiment of this and surrounding counties is deep seated and growing and in a few years no Editor can be acceptable to this community who will boldly advocate the perpetuity of the ‘peculiar Institution.’” Elijah C. Phister to Adam Beatty, December 31, 1849, Beatty-Quisenberry Papers, Filson Historical Society.
But despite common attitudes toward labor and similar soils, John David could not transform southern Ohio’s agricultural practices. Clues to his failure can be found in Buckeyes’ reaction to David’s proposals. Hemp had a history in Kentucky, where it was traditionally harvested by slaves. The process of separating the fiber from the stalk to make rope was labor intensive, especially the “breaking” or freeing of the lint from the wood. Based on David’s reception, freemen north of the Ohio River associated that backbreaking work with slaves. This was a group free men certainly did not want to be identified with. The stigma of slavery associated with tobacco and hemp production prevented many a farmer from taking into serious consideration the observations of agricultural innovators like John David. Just as well, by the 1840s a degree of path dependency limited the amount of transformation either Kentuckians or Ohioans would be willing to undergo. Local infrastructure, culture, and business interests were tied to the systems in place. With change came uncertainty and perhaps more importantly a significant reevaluation of labor practices in agriculture. For most Western farmers, this was too much to bear.

Slavery in the Ohio Valley served an important role in mitigating the labor shortages that generally plagued the American West. The institution may not have been as profitable as in states further south, but it provided a much needed source of manual labor. With an abundance of land, few wayfarers west of the Appalachians wanted to work for others for extended periods of time. Almost all wanted to eventually live out the Jeffersonian vision of American Empire by becoming independent landowners. The federal government’s monopolization of land grants in the Northwest Territories enabled this vision by stymying land aggrandizement. Such policy aimed to root out the development of an aristocratic class in the West. An unintended consequence of this policy was that the vast supply of land deprived larger landowners of the labor necessary for working their fields. Kentuckians simply acquired slaves to perform this labor. Above the Ohio River this solution was a trickier proposition.109

The Ohio River did not stop people from bringing de-facto slavery into free territory. Slave owners worked around the legal system by giving lip service to the law while persisting in their traditional practices. Virginian and future Ohio Governor Thomas Worthington brought with him a retinue of free black servants to the Northwest Territory in the 1790s. Blacks on his

---

estate lived in separate quarters while performing domestic and field labor. When one member of Worthington’s “black family” escaped to Cincinnati, he was forcibly returned.110 Perhaps the experience of Samuel Gwathmey best illustrates the ambiguity of slavery along the Ohio River. Also a Virginian, Gwathmey moved to Louisville in 1801. In 1804 he became clerk for the newly formed Clark County just across the river in Indiana Territory. After changing residence, Gwathmey freed his slave Peter on November 11, 1804, citing his belief that “perpetual and involuntary servitude is contrary to the principles of Natural human rights.” That very same day, Gwathmey entered into a contract with Peter, indenturing his former slave for the term of thirty years. Peter’s age is not given, but if he was still alive in 1835, Gwathmey promised him “a horse, a milch cow, an ox, a grub hoe and to give him for life, 25 acres of land in Clark Co.” The sincerity of Gwathmey’s gesture is further complicated by Peter’s marital status. If Peter was married, his wife was not freed. The offspring of a female slave was considered her owner’s property. This meant that if Peter was married, his children would have been born slaves. One has to wonder if Gwathmey ever intended to free Peter. In the political fallout of Andrew Jackson’s election in 1829, Gwathmey returned to Louisville, eventually becoming president of the Mechanics and Savings Bank. Like many banks in Kentucky, the institution brokered and dealt in slaves. Despite his longstanding connection with slavery, Gwathmey did not want it to be a part of America’s future. In 1836 he was elected to a committee of the Louisville Colonization Society. This group concerned itself with “improvement to the emancipated negro” and adamantly opposed “the wicked cause of immediate abolition.” For many whites who traversed either side of the Ohio River, “the principles of Natural human rights” may have been just words. Some like Samuel Gwathmey may have genuinely disliked the peculiar institution, but its economic advantages led them to act contrary to their feelings. No state or river was going to change that.111

Of course others in the Ohio Valley loathed slavery, or preferred not to employ forced labor on principle. Oftentimes men of such principle suffered financially for their beliefs. H.O. Beatty moved from his native Kentucky to start a farm outside of Toledo, Ohio, just south of the Michigan border. By 1835 he wanted to sell that farm. He wrote his father, “I have always

expressed a desire to farm in a free state: But my situation renders it almost necessary [to sell].” Beatty complained that it was “very hard to get hands that are worth keeping” and “impossible, to get a house keeper upon whose honesty and prudence I can depend in the management of household affairs.” Analogous to the Ohio Valley at the beginning of the century, northwestern Ohio during the 1830s was sparsely settled with an abundance of cheap land. People who ventured there wanted to own land, not work it for someone else. John David’s 1842 observations on hemp culture in Georgetown, Ohio reveal a different situation in southern Ohio. With his operation adjacent the bustling river and canal nexus of Portsmouth, David was confident that he could find free laborers whom he considered superior workers. Instead of basing this conclusion on some type of progressive view toward slavery, as some historians have suggested existed exclusively north of the river, David had the luxury of being able to choose between slave and free labor. H.O. Beatty did not have that option in northern Ohio, and whether out of conviction or from circumstance, he paid for it. Beatty gave up on his farm, eventually settling in California.112

**Working in the City**

The distinctions between free and slave labor were especially difficult to establish or enforce in river cities. Distinguishing race was much easier. The leading figures in Ohio River towns acted to keep blacks in a subservient position. The legality of slavery in a city determined the tactics whites would use, but the end result was the same. In Louisville, only three percent black residents were free; the rest were in bondage. This social scenario made them easier to control.113 The free status of blacks in Cincinnati created the frightening possibility for whites that some might acquire social standing, perhaps even demand to participate in republican government. Cincinnatians prevented the inevitable upward social mobility of the black community by denying them the very liberties white males cherished as being intrinsically American. The smooth waters of the Ohio River may have embodied the increasingly vehement

112 H.O. Beatty to Adam Beatty, July 25, 1835, Beatty-Quisenberry Papers, Filson Historical Society; Winfield J. Davis, *An Illustrated History of Sacramento County, California* (1890), 254-255.
national debate over slavery for American and foreign visitors, but that was not the case for those who actually stared everyday across that stream into a free or slave state.

Occupations related to mercantile commerce or skilled trades dominated the workforce in Ohio River cities prior to the Civil War. This included grocers, tobacconists, cobblers, hatters, and stone masons. The financial elite in places like Louisville and Cincinnati were primarily mercantile businessmen connected to the Ohio River trade. The 1840 Cincinnati Directory shows that about one fifth, or twenty percent of men in Cincinnati were in mercantile-oriented professions, although not all of them were the elites who led the business or religious organizations in the city. Artisans and independent craftsmen filled out the middle class. Almost one half of the white labor force listed in the Cincinnati directory consisted of members of this artisan class. The lower classes worked in either heavy or domestic labor; the former were laborers and semi-skilled factory hands, the latter, cooks, stewards, or washer women. The capital and political power in river cities was predominantly controlled by the mercantile and artisan classes.114

Artisan classes used their size and solidarity to impress their will on urban life on the Ohio River. Mercantile and business elements were the undisputed leaders of these commercially oriented river cities, but were a relatively minor portion of the overall population. Artisans saw their work as extolling republican virtue: they were independent, useful to the community, and uncorrupted by extreme wealth or poverty. Like farmers who travelled west in the early nineteenth century for the opportunity to own land, artisans in the rapidly growing eastern cities escaped to the Ohio Valley because there was less competition, and it was thus easier to become a successful tradesman. Craftsmen defended their personal independence by resisting market forces that threatened to put them into a factory system. Their power was exerted through overt political patronage or more informal small scale strikes or boycotts.115

The artisan class was no friend of the poor, however. Craftsmen saw impoverished, unskilled laborers as both a threat to their status and infected with moral lassitude. The

114 Aaron, Cincinnati, Queen City of the West, 54-58; Clinton W. Terry, “‘The Most Commercial of People’: Cincinnati, the Civil War, and the Rise of Industrial Capitalism, 1861-1865,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Cincinnati, 2002); for a compilation of the 1840 Directory Data, see Figure 2 in the Appendix.
manufactory establishments which trades people competed with employed these groups of unskilled labor. The lower classes in river cities were easy targets for artisans eager to differentiate themselves. Many of the poor were transient, working on the river for months at a time, or moving on to better opportunities wherever they presented themselves. By contrast, artisans tended to hold a more permanent presence in the city, and actively organized trade unions and mechanical fraternities. These groups pushed for a “just” wage and equality of condition among workers.

The influx of people into river cities in the early nineteenth century lowered labor costs and hastened the process of industrialization already underway in northeastern cities. Powerful artisan groups reacted by limiting access to their community. To do this, they scrutinized all elements which could disqualify a person from becoming a member of a trade. Consequently blacks and Catholics were specifically targeted in Louisville and Cincinnati as not being capable of participating in the republican government artisans felt was their birthright.¹¹⁶

River cities were extremely sensitive particularly to the position of blacks within their communities. Predicated on the cultural traditions mentioned earlier, many of the seminal figures in the Ohio Valley preferred to see blacks as they did in colonial Virginia or Carolina: subservient and dependent on whites. A strong community of free blacks threatened to undermine the racial notions and traditions upon which this system was based. But cities proved to be very difficult places to apply these racial values. American slavery was designed and suited for plantation agriculture. When the slave population was dispersed in this rural setting, masters could easily monitor the movement and behavior of their workforce. By contrast in a city, slaves and white laborers openly competed in the same space.¹¹⁷ The profitability of slavery in an industrial setting did not help this situation for slave owners. To turn a profit, many business people in Louisville blurred the distinctions between slavery and freedom in their workforce.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ For the economic viability of industrial slavery, see Starobin, Industrial Slavery, 158-162; Charles B. Dew, Bond of Iron: Master and Slave at Buffalo Forge (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994).
The nature of slavery in Kentucky was unlike other states which sanctioned the institution. The hemp, tobacco, and corn the state exported were not only less profitable than cash crops like cotton, they also had shorter growing seasons. For much of the year therefore, slaves could be idle during the colder months when there would be little to do in the fields. This had two major impacts. First, slave owners in Kentucky tended to have fewer slaves per person than in other Southern states. Second, to combat periods of idleness and the decreasing return of owning slaves, owners in Kentucky hired out their slaves more than states further south. This latter factor provided a sizeable workforce for industrial centers along the southern bank of the Ohio River.\(^\text{119}\)

A slave contract between Alexander Bullitt and John Andrew Tarascon in 1807 underscores the difficulty of distinguishing or separating slave and free labor in a river city. Tarascon hired seven of Bullitt’s slaves to convert locally harvested hemp into rope and bagging on his rope walk in Louisville. The slaves would for two years “be Employed as Laborers at and in the rope walk…preparing of materials for and manufactoring of ropes and cordages.” The contract very specifically prohibits slaves from engaging in “no other kind of Business whatever” for Tarascon. Bullitt also required Tarascon to outfit his slaves with clothes and housing. The only female slave, Lucinda, “would not be compelled to render any Service than to Cook, wash and mend for herself and the aforesaid negroes and to nurse them when sick.” And when it came to working alongside whites, “none of [the slaves will be] compelled to labor longer than from sunrise to sun set unless the white laborers work longer.” The slaves even were granted equal time for “eating and refreshment as the white Laborers.” Alexander Bullitt was leasing valuable property to Andrew Tarascon. He made sure in his contract with him that his slaves would be treated well. Bullitt still was required to pay for medical expenses for his slaves, which he did. Inside the rope walk, Bullitt’s slaves worked the same hours as white workers, performing the same labor.\(^\text{120}\)

Outside of the ropewalk, between sunset and sunrise, living conditions between black slaves and free white workers was also quite similar. Alexander Tarascon agreed to build a


\(^{120}\) Articles of agreement made and entered into by and between Alexander Scott Bullitt of Jefferson county and State of Kentucky of the one part and John And Tarascon of the same County and State of the other part, September 1, 1807, Bullitt Family Papers, Filson Historical Society; G. Halls to Alexander S. Bullitt, June 1, 1809, Bullitt Family Papers, Filson Historical Society. Dr. Hall asked for $32 for “my attendance on your negroes at Mr. Tarascons rope walk.”
double and single “Cabbin” for Bullitt’s slaves, as well as feed them “fresh meat” and bread everyday. These stipulations likely tried to replicate the living conditions on Bullitt’s Oxmoor Plantation. Other river city industries, like mills and foundries usually built tenements for their slaves to live in. Another rope walk in Louisville owned by Charles William Thruston, provided such boarding for their white laborers. Thruston recorded who boarded in his tenement from August 1829 to February 1830, charging them at the rate of $2 per week. Men like “Mr. Reele” only stayed one week, others like “Mr. Clark” spent over three weeks in Thruston’s tenement. Such short periods suggest that these men were engaged in seasonal work during the winter months. Whether coming from rural areas or from other temporary employment, their labor supplemented Thruston’s slave force. These men worked alongside slaves, and quite possibly lived with them as well.121

Slaves preferred to get jobs connected with river commerce. Whether as a stevedore or working on a steamboat, they enjoyed a degree of independence not available on a plantation or in a factory. Lists of slaves and their occupations in Louisville were not recorded. However references to their presence on the wharfs and quays do exist. In a letter concerning his insurance business C.T. Taylor observed: “Life insurance is becoming very popular here & a great many risks can be obtained especially on negroes lives employed on Steam Boats & River Characters.” When German visitor Maximilian Wied stepped off a steamboat in Louisville, he mentioned that “Negroes conveyed our baggage to the inn.” One would think that working so close to the river, slaves could have easily escaped as Eliza did in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Although some took this opportunity, most did not. Many slaves took pride in the fact that they bought their freedom. But this often led to more bad than good for former slaves. Freed blacks were treated with great suspicion in Kentucky and in free states across the river. African American minister Elisha Green explained “I was more of a slave after I bought myself than before. Before…I could go many places without interruption, but when I became a freeman, I could not cross the Ohio River.” Slaves did not enjoy their condition and wanted to be free. Unfortunately

121 Articles of agreement made and entered into by and between Alexander Scott Bullitt of Jefferson county and State of Kentucky of the one part and John And’ Tarascon of the same County and State of the other part, September 1, 1807, Bullitt Family Papers, Filson Historical Society; Starobin, Industrial Slavery, 57-60; Receipt, February 15, 1830, Charles William Thruston Papers, Filson Historical Society; Charles W. Thurston owned thirty-two slaves according to the 1830 US Federal Census, 1830 US Census, Louisville, Jefferson, Kentucky, 72; Seth Rockman discusses the sporadic nature of urban employment for the poor during this period, see Rockman, Scraping By, 46-49.
the cost of that freedom usually meant leaving their family behind, or worse treatment across the river. If blacks wanted the freedom they sought, they needed to go to Canada, not Ohio.\textsuperscript{122}

Slavery was hardly a popular institution among the white residents of Louisville. Several artisan strikes during the 1830s and 1840s were broken by employers who turned to slave labor to fill vacancies. Frustrated at having to compete with slaves, many white craftsmen took an anti-slavery stance. A meeting of “the mechanics and working men of Louisville” resolved in 1849 that “[slavery] degrades labor, enervates industry, interferes with the occupations of free laboring citizens, separates too widely the poor and the rich, shuts out the laboring classes from the blessings of education, and tends to drive from the State all who depend upon personal labor for support.” These workingmen further asserted that “the laboring man has a full a right to his occupation and the profits of his labor, as the master to his slave.” Most voters in Louisville agreed with these sentiments, sending anti-slavery representatives to state and national government in the 1830s and 1840s.\textsuperscript{123} Locals also believed that eliminating slavery in the city would make it more competitive with Cincinnati. Merchants in Louisville reported to visiting British geologist Charles Lyell that “Cincinnati, founded at a later date, would not have outstripped her rival in the race, so as to number now a population of 100,000 souls, more than double that of Louisville, but for the existence of slavery.” The Ohio River trade made Louisville a commercial center, and therefore largely incompatible with traditional practices of slavery. Although black slaves enjoyed more liberties in the city than elsewhere in Kentucky, their social status limited them to menial labor. White workers still bemoaned having to compete with slaves. Their solution was to rid the city of slaves in order to protect white labor.\textsuperscript{124}

Across the Ohio River in Cincinnati, the inverse situation existed. Whites could not technically control the black community as its members were legally free. But where Louisville struggled to compete with black slave labor, whites in Cincinnati rendered black economic competition feckless by creating laws that restricted their professional options and encouraged

\textsuperscript{123} Tallant, \textit{Evil Necessity}, 130-131; \textit{The Examiner}, April 14, 1849.
\textsuperscript{124}Charles Lyell, \textit{A Second Visit to the United States of North America} (London, 1849), 2:279-280: Tallant and others argue that slavery was a declining practice in Kentucky and Louisville. They are correct in that the population of slaves after 1850 declines in the city. They need to take into account, however, that prices of field hands spiked around that time. For many Kentuckians, selling their slaves became more lucrative than keeping them. Slavery would have been just as strong in the city had not the heightening demand for slaves elsewhere affected the state.
them to leave the city. Since free blacks still tried to overcome these obstacles, Cincinnatians employed violence and intimidation targeted at the black community to keep them in check. The end result was a scenario very similar to slave-holding Louisville. Blacks in both places, whether slave or free, performed heavy or domestic labor and almost all were lower class.

Whites in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois hoped to limit black settlement in their states by passing prejudicial laws targeted at “negroes and mulattos.” These laws deprived blacks the equality and even playing field that whites cherished as being fundamentally central to American principles. Three years after gaining statehood in 1807, Ohio’s legislature passed “An act to regulate black and mulatto persons.” Popularly known as Black Laws, they required blacks to enter into a bond of five hundred dollars with two other free persons who would guarantee their “good behavior” to live in the state. Furthermore, they were prohibited from testifying in cases involving whites. In Cincinnati, the city council required blacks to pay a tax in 1834 to support public schools even though their children were barred from attending them. Blacks resisted these legal barriers by forming their own churches and schools, or by becoming financially successful. Whites fought them the entire way. Owning real estate was one of the few avenues open for aspiring black businessmen. In 1842, white Cincinnatians even moved to close this path by banning blacks “from purchasing or holding real estate” in the city. The legal obstacles white Cincinnatians placed on black residents succeeded in discouraging their immigration. With the exception of the late 1820s, blacks never exceeded five percent of the overall population. Bustling Ohio River cities valued white labor, not its alternatives.125

Blacks in Cincinnati performed manual jobs, much of it on the river. Their “little Africa” neighborhood sat astride the waterfront. Nearly twenty percent of those listed in the 1840 Colored Directory “followed the river” or worked river related jobs such as steamboat cook or draymen. Blacks found a rare niche as barbers, counting the city elite among their customers. However, the vast majority of the blacks in Cincinnati were unskilled or domestics, working as general laborers, stewards, drivers, cooks, or washerwomen. A local editor wrote in 1827 that the “evils of slavery…infected Cincinnati” leaving blacks only the jobs “despised as being the

---

work of slaves.” Around fifteen percent of the black population in 1840 was employed in a skill or trade, such as a cobbbling, carpentry, or tailoring. By comparison, roughly one half of the white community that year worked in a trade. Even with the support of certain abolitionists, black artisans had an especially hard time plying their trade in the city. The black community complained that their skilled workers “find no employment not even among [white] friends.” Much like Louisville, these experiences point to the white artisan classes holding black labor in contempt, whether slave or free, rural or urban.\(^{126}\)

When the law and public opinion could not keep blacks in a sufficiently subordinate position, white Cincinnatians resorted to violence. In 1829 the number of blacks in Cincinnati reached its highest antebellum level at almost ten percent of the overall population. A group from the African Methodist Episcopal Church, including former slave John Malvin, petitioned the state legislature that year to repeal the Black Laws that required them to post bond and carry papers proving their freedom. Their petition was published in a local newspaper and “raised a great deal of comment” in the city. The rival Methodist Episcopal Church (also black), perhaps seeing the storm that was coming, publicly denied taking part in the effort to repeal the Black Laws, asking for “a continuation of the smiles of the white people as we have hitherto enjoyed them.”\(^{127}\) By August 1829, a significant number of the whites in the city sought to interrogate blacks on their compliance with these Black Laws, as enforcement had apparently been neglected. Between August 15 and 22, white workers “animated by the prospect of high wages” razed black homes and shops. Nikki Marie Taylor identifies this episode as one of the earliest attempts in American history to completely cleanse a society of blacks. After the violence half the black population left Cincinnati for good, some founding an all-black community in Ontario.\(^{128}\)

The dramatic events of 1829 hardly spelled the end to antebellum racial discord in the Queen City. In 1836 white Cincinnatians reacted violently to the introduction of an abolitionist press to their city. The year prior, the American Abolitionist Society embarked on a mailing campaign in the southern states that inflamed passions on the slavery issue unlike anything the nation had witnessed before. In the context of this already charged atmosphere, Cincinnatians

\(^{126}\)For the 1840 figures, see Figure 2 in the Appendix. Joe William Trotter Jr., *River Jordan: African American Urban Life in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 27-32


\(^{128}\)Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom*, 50, 63.
viewed the opening of the press (by white abolitionists) as evidence of blacks’ desire for full integration. Blacks and their homes were subsequently attacked. Five years later in 1841 a drought brought hard times to poor Cincinnatians. As in 1829, white workers found in the black community an easy scapegoat and target. No side of the Ohio River, whether slave or free, was safe for blacks. John Malvin’s reaction to the 1829 riots shows an interesting reality however. A member of the group that petitioned to end the Black Codes only a few months earlier, he likely realized that it would be a good idea to skip town after the violence. Of all the places he might have chosen to seek refuge, he went downriver to Louisville. Although certainly not a town friendly to people of his race, Malvin must have felt that in the diversity of another river town he could at least negotiate his position within society. Practice, not law mattered there.¹²⁹

The Ohio River did not divide labor practices; rather it made them more alike. Geography overcame the different laws and structures that defined states like Kentucky and Ohio. Settlement patterns and agricultural methods flowed with the Ohio River. The kindred cultural practices and economic conditions on either side of the river were hardly the result of conscious effort by Westerners. Westerners did however make conscious efforts to become successful, and operated within different societal structures to achieve that aim. The quickest route to wealth in the Ohio Valley during the early nineteenth century entailed harvesting the natural bounty of the region for export. Kentuckians and Ohioans realized this, and acted accordingly. The Ohio River was the geographic, economic, and cultural center of this world.

AFTERWORD

It is ironic that people began to see the Ohio River as a boundary after the institution of slavery had been abolished. Kentucky’s decision to ultimately remain in the Union during the secession crisis of 1861 was probably the greatest test of Western solidarity. Had the state felt little connection with its northern neighbors and left for the Confederacy, the course of the war would have been much different. Abraham Lincoln recognized that retaining Kentucky was tantamount to winning the war, writing in 1861, “I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game.”

Civil War did not destroy people’s sense of Western-ness along the Ohio River, but it hastened its demise.

The downfall of Western identity along the Ohio River originated in the very seed that gave that community birth in the first place: economic interest. Civil War with the South effectively halted all trade down the Mississippi. The commercial economy of the region collapsed, diverting major river cities’ economic interests toward industrial development. The loss of access to the Mississippi also turned railroads into the most important and reliable transportation networks during the war. Westerners had realized since at least the 1840s that railroads were the way of the future. This attitude is evident in the Louisville city council’s 1861 decision to change its seal from a steamboat ascending the Falls of the Ohio to a locomotive with the words “progress” emblazoned beneath. Although it would not be until the 1880s when railroads would surpass rivers as the major trunk routes in the west, river cities like Cincinnati and Louisville realized that their future economic prosperity was tied to establishing rail connections to the southern states. The Ohio River was slowly fading as the economic focal point in the region.

During the secession crisis of 1861, Kentuckians stood at a crossroads. The hemp and foodstuffs grown in the state were sent south to supplement the cotton-producing plantation economy. Yet they realized that joining the Confederacy and “bringing the Canadian border to

130 Abraham Lincoln to H.O. Browning, September 22, 1861, The Writings of Abraham Lincoln (1906), 5:362-365
131 Clinton W. Terry, “‘The Most Commercial of People’: Cincinnati, the Civil War, and the Rise of Industrial Capitalism, 1861-1865,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Cincinnati, 2002);
the Ohio River” as they put it, was an untenable proposition.\textsuperscript{133} If the North and South were to be two independent countries, Kentuckians would have a much more difficult time requisitioning their fugitive slaves in a foreign country. Similarly, Cincinnatians on the north side of the river did not want separation. When abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips visited the Queen City in 1862, his comments supporting immediate disunion with slave-holders were met with rocks, rotten eggs, and cries of “Hang the nigger.”\textsuperscript{134} Communities along the Ohio River which relied on the river trade would undoubtedly suffer if their neighbors across the river followed different laws. For a community now riven by a national conflict that openly tested regional loyalties, Westerners could still not imagine the Ohio River as a boundary between them. Both sides realized such a border would never last or effectively serve the purpose of dividing the land.

The Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 made both sides of the Ohio River free territory but actually served to drive people on either side apart. Many Kentuckians believed that they had fought for the Union to preserve slavery, not abolish it. Kentuckians’ loyalty was not only rewarded with the loss of their slaves without compensation, but also the humiliation of Reconstruction in the state. These painful experiences were not endured across the river. “Democratic politics enveloped in a Lost Cause narrative” would dominate the state in the years following the war.\textsuperscript{135} Many Kentucky veterans of the G.A.R. tacitly supported the cultivation of a Confederate memory in the state by implementing prejudicial laws and race codes which attempted to recreate the slave society they enjoyed before the war.\textsuperscript{136} North of the Ohio River, the exodus of former slaves which whites had feared for years came to fruition. As full citizens, blacks could no longer be forced to pay bonds to live in a state like Ohio, or denied access altogether as was the case in Indiana and Illinois. Reflecting a common human impulse to identify with the “right side of history,” river cities like Cincinnati conveniently disregarded antebellum realities to promote a memory of being on the doorstep to freedom which is perpetuated to this day.\textsuperscript{137} When people think of the early nineteenth century on the northern

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{133} Wilson Porter Shortridge, “Kentucky Neutrality in 1861” \textit{Mississippi Valley Historical Review} 9 (March 1923): 288.
\item \textsuperscript{134} \textit{Cincinnati Daily Enquirer}, Marc 25, 1862.
\item \textsuperscript{135} Anne E. Marshall, \textit{Creating A Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State} (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 34.
\item \textsuperscript{136} Patrick A. Lewis, “Master for Loyalty’s Sake: Benjamin F. Buckner, Proslavery Unionism, and Civil War Kentucky” (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 2012).
\end{itemize}
bank of the Ohio River, they prefer to recall the Underground Railroad, exceptional abolitionist communities like Ripley, Ohio, and famed abolitionists like Harriet Beecher Stowe. Cincinnatians do not want to remember the putrid smell of Wendell Phillips’ egg-drenched suit, the violence and laws which disenfranchised blacks, or the riverine economy which both created the city and tied it to the iniquities of slavery.

As railroads took over after the Civil War, the Ohio River became an imagined boundary, based on a reinterpretation of the past which, as always, suited the business interests of those living in the Ohio Valley. The Ohio River was then, and is now, an important highway in the region. But the economic primacy of railroads in the late nineteenth century meant that people were not as intimately tied to the river as they once were. Business figures in Kentucky employed a largely fictive Confederate heritage they shared with Southern states in order to woo railroad lines and business away from their traditional rivals across the river. With the Ohio River no longer the paramount commercial artery, Kentuckians could afford to spread calumnies about their neighbors, contrasting their slave-holding Dixie past with the Yankeedom across the river.138

The Ohio River no longer divides slavery and freedom, and a series of locks and dams installed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century mean that the infamously smooth waters of the Ohio never run dry as they once did. Despite these improvements to the political and physical condition of the river, the Ohio River divides people today more than it ever did before the Civil War.

Figure 1. Harper's New Monthly Magazine, December 1858, 141-142.

Arrowsmith's Panorama of Western Travel.

[DESIGNED FOR EXHIBITION IN ENGLAND.]
**Creating Flint Island Bar at low water.**

**Striking a Sawyer.**

**Curious effect produced on Steamer by running aground.** [A frequent occurrence.]

**Sketch of Baggage belonging to Southern Gent, who occupied Stateroom with Arrowsmith.**

**Scene at Dinner-table.** Every man for himself. [This sketch is very correct.]

**Portraits of several Colonels, Majors, Members of Congress, etc.—Passed on board Steamer.**

**View of Steamer's Bar.** [Here we a Bourbon among us!]

**Panoramic view of Scenery of the Mississippi, from Cairo to New Orleans.**
Figure 2. Occupations in Cincinnati by race.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>barber</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cook</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trade job</td>
<td>11*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laborer</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>carpenter</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>draymen</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white washer</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tailor/seamstress</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>food processing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>follows the river</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>steward</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caulkers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shoe black</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>huckster</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>livery stable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coopers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>washer wmn</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cobbler</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>printer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>masonry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>musician</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>White</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gov't admin</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trade job</td>
<td>107</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draymen</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>merchant*</td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>food processing</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>follows river</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steward</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cooper</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Packer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerk</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huckster</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bar keep</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proprietor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currier</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisherman</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3. Population of Cincinnati and Louisville, 1810-1860.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LOUISVILLE</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>total</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>slave</td>
<td>free black</td>
<td>slave value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>1357</td>
<td>2886</td>
<td>1031</td>
<td>93 [2.3%]</td>
<td>$624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>4012</td>
<td>7703</td>
<td>2406</td>
<td>232 [2.2%]</td>
<td>$875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>10341</td>
<td>7703</td>
<td>2406</td>
<td>232 [2.2%]</td>
<td>$591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>21210</td>
<td>17161</td>
<td>3430</td>
<td>619 [2.9%]</td>
<td>$773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>43194</td>
<td>36224</td>
<td>5432</td>
<td>1538 [3.6%]</td>
<td>$756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>68033</td>
<td>61213</td>
<td>4903</td>
<td>1917 [2.8%]</td>
<td>$1,513</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CINCINNATI</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>total</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>free black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1810</td>
<td>2540</td>
<td>2458</td>
<td>82 [3.2%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>9841</td>
<td>9381</td>
<td>433 [4.4%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>24831</td>
<td>23741</td>
<td>1090 [4.4%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>46338</td>
<td>44098</td>
<td>2240 [4.8%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>115435</td>
<td>112198</td>
<td>3237 [2.8%]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>161044</td>
<td>157313</td>
<td>3731 [2.3%]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Secondary Sources


Downes, Randolph C. “Trade in Frontier Ohio.” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 16 (March 1930).


———. “‘The invention of the steamboat was intended for US.” *Ohio Valley History* 12, no. 3 (2012): 3-20.


Hulbert, Archer Butler. _The Cumberland Road_. 1904.


Phillips, Christopher. “‘The Chrysalis State’: Slavery, Confederate Identity, and the Creation of a Border South.” In _Inside the Confederate Nation: Essays in Honor of Emory M. Thomas_,


*Printed Primary Sources*


*Cincinnati Directory and Advertiser for 1831*. Cincinnati, 1831.


Davis, Winfield J. *An Illustrated History of Sacramento County, California*. 1890.

Dodson, S.H., ed. *Diary and Correspondence of Salmon P. Chase*. Vol. 2. 1903.

Durrett, Reuben T. *An Historical Sketch of St. Paul’s Church, Louisville, Ky.* 1889.


Lyford, William Gilm. The Western Address Directory: Containing the Cards of Merchants,
Memorial of the Directors of the Board of Trade at Pittsburgh. 1836.
Monzert, Leonard. Monzert’s Practical Distiller: An Exhaustive Treatise on the Art of Distilling
and Rectifying Spirituous Liquors and Alcohol. 1889.
Performed in the Year 1817. London, 1818.
Poore, Ben Perley, ed. Veto Messages of the Presidents of the United States with the Action of
Proceedings of the managers of the Ohio Canal Company: at Louisville, the 11th day of
Report of the Committee on Laws and Ordinances, in Relation to Common Schools of Cincinnati.
1844.
Shaffer, David Henry. The Cincinnati, Covington, Newport and Fulton Directory for 1840.
Cincinnati, n.d.
Co., 1852.
1843.

Unpublished Sources

Filson Historical Society
Beatty-Quisenberry Papers
Bond and Power of Attorney, Book 2
Bullitt Family Papers
C.T. Lord Collection
Charles William Thruston Papers
Corlis-Respess Family Collection
The First American West: The Ohio River Valley, 1750-1820
Cincinnati Historical Society
Edmund Dexter Bill of Lading Book
Organization of Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, October 1839 to July 1863.
M.K. Kellog Journal

Newspapers
Alexandria Gazette (Alexandria, VA).
Argus of Western America (Frankfort, KY).
Cincinnati Advertiser and Ohio Phoenix.
Cincinnati Daily Enquirer.
Cincinnati Daily Gazette.
Cincinnati Enquirer.
Cincinnati Gazette.
Daily Louisville Herald and Commercial Gazette.
The Examiner (Louisville).
Frankfort Argus (Frankfort, KY).
Kentucky Reporter (Lexington).
Louisville Daily Advertiser.
Louisville Daily Journal.
Louisville Public Advertiser.
Ohio Monitor (Columbus).
Supporter and Scioto Gazette (Chillicothe, OH).
True American (Lexington).
Washington Review and Examiner (Washington, PA).
Western Spy and Miami Gazette (Cincinnati).