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Lest the rebels come to power: The life of William Dennison, 1815–1882, early Ohio Republican

Mulligan, Thomas Cecil, Ph.D.

The Ohio State University, 1994

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LEST THE REBELS COME TO POWER:
THE LIFE OF WILLIAM DENNISON, 1815 - 1882,
EARLY OHIO REPUBLICAN

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
Graduate School of the Ohio State University

by

Thomas C. Mulligan, BBA, MS, MA.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1994

Dissertation Committee:           Approved by
Allan R. Millett
Merton L. Dillon
Joan Cashin

Adviser
Department of History
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T.C.M.
VITA

1959 ......................... B. B. A. Fenn College, (Now Cleveland State University), Cleveland, Ohio.

1963 ......................... M.A. The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

1974 ......................... Graduate, Armed Forces Staff College, Norfolk, Virginia.


1979 ......................... M.S. George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

1989 ......................... M.A. The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

Major Field: History

Secondary Fields: American Nineteenth Century History
American Diplomatic History
Latin American History
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INTRODUCTION

In large measure we define ourselves in terms of those who came before us. The lives of well-remembered Americans such as Henry Clay, Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Beecher Stowe shape our image of that fateful time in the middle of the nineteenth century when our forebears fought each other to determine if we were one nation or two, and whether slavery would continue as part of our communal organizations. There were over thirty million Americans in 1860, almost twice that number in 1880, and all of them played a part in shaping our legacy. Tens of thousands were in their day prominent leaders in politics, letters, business, science, and the arts, but have since been largely forgotten. Yet study of these second-tier leaders is instructive. Their lives offer insight into the lives of the better remembered Americans who were their contemporaries, and often they shaped events in ways that have not been well understood.

This dissertation is a study of one of those second-tier American Victorians who was prominent in his day but has since largely faded from memory. William Dennison was a privileged scion of a prominent Ohio family of the early
statehood period who grew to be an uncompromising opponent of slavery, a leading Whig, a founding member of the Ohio Republican party, and governor of Ohio in the opening months of the Civil War. In that capacity he did his greatest service to his state and nation by raising troops, furthering Union aims in the West, and guarding his state and region against what he believed to be an imminent threat from the Confederacy. William Dennison went on to serve the Union cause as a Republican party insider during the difficult electoral struggles of 1862 and 1863, when the uncertainties and resolve of the Northern electorate played out at the polls. Late in the war, Abraham Lincoln appointed Dennison Postmaster General, a position he held into the Andrew Johnson administration, when he found himself caught between the ever-isolated Johnson and Radical Republican wings of his party. Trying to be a conciliator, Dennison offended both camps and was forced to leave the Cabinet, his political career in decline. He played minor roles in the back-room bargaining between Republican stalwarts and Southern partisans that made Rutherford B. Hayes President of the United States, and in the nomination of Chester A. Arthur for Vice President, putting the New Yorker in line to succeed the assassinated James A. Garfield.
William Dennison was a proud patrician of an uncompromising generation of Americans that took its differences over property rights in human beings to civil war. He never wavered in his beliefs, and lived to see the generation that fought the war brush him and his convictions aside.
CHAPTER I
BEGINNINGS

As the year 1815 faded into winter, citizens of Cincinnati had reason for their optimism and self-confidence. War with Britain was over! Future historians would quibble about the meaning of this conflict, but to contemporary denizens of the Trans-Mississippi West there was no doubt. The young republic had won its second war for independence, the great river was open to unrestricted American commerce, and the Indian menace to the Ohio valley was broken—forever, as it turned out. The way was clear for another surge of western expansion surpassing that of the 1780s and 90s, and the Queen City was positioned to take full advantage of it.¹

On November 23, 1815, William Jr. was born to William and Mary Dennison, newly returned to Cincinnati after an unsuccessful business venture in Louisiana. William Sr. was an innkeeper who had migrated to Cincinnati from Monmouth County, New Jersey, about the turn of the century. He prospered after the financial panic of 1819 and was managing his own establishment by 1822. Barely literate, but personable, honest, and shrewd, the elder Dennison was
described by contemporaries as "a gentleman of the old school." Soon he opened a new inn, with lodgings, dining room, bar, and stables on the corner of Fifth and Main streets, across from the main market and near the courthouse. Dennison House grew and prospered under its genial proprietor until just before his death at age 84. Dennison House then passed from the family to remain a Cincinnati fixture until it was torn down in 1932.2

Mary Carter Dennison was the daughter of Thomas and Thankful Carter, pioneers to Cincinnati from Massachusetts before the turn of the century. The Carters ran a store on Front Street between Walnut and Vine where they, too, prospered and became early community supporters. Mary and her parents were devout Methodists, hosting early worship services in their home, and were founding members of Old Stone Church on Fifth and Sycamore Streets, the first Methodist church in Cincinnati. Mary and Will Dennison were married about 1808. William Jr. was the fourth of their eight children.3

The Early Years:

Frontier Cincinnati was an exciting place for a young lad to grow up in. When busy Mary was not looking, young Bill might sneak a peek into the "boot room," or bar, redolent with blue cigar smoke and the essence of unwashed travelers. A black servant dexterously replaced a brimming
spittoon with a gleaming fresh one. Roughhewn Tennessee backwoodsmen sporting huge Bowie knives rubbed shoulders with beaver-hatted Easterners, local farmers in town selling their wares, merchants stepping from their counting rooms to fortify their blood, and countless other colorful characters seemingly created just to enliven a little boy's imagination. Most quaffed corn whiskey at 3½¢ a glass, though some chose beer at 6½¢ a bottle. In winter a corpulent cadre of regulars would seize seats by the roaring fire and stare off all comers, like squat bulldogs guarding a bone. Meals were announced by a bell, the dining room unlocked, and Bill would scramble to avoid the rush. Vast quantities of food would disappear quickly as the guests made their way, family style, through great platters served up from the steaming kitchen. The timid or squeamish soon learned that their choices were to join in or suffer short rations. Bill was no doubt envious as Mary led him firmly to join his sisters at the ladies' table.4

A traveler described meals at the typical Cincinnati inn of the day. "A boy, as clerk, attends to take down the names in order that when bills are settled no improper deductions should be made." Perhaps Bill aspired to this job as he grew older. "...at breakfast plenty of beef steak, bacon and eggs, white bread, Johnny cakes (of Indian meal), butter, tea and coffee. Dinner--two or three dishes
of fowl, roast meats, kidney beans, peas, new potatoes, preserves, cherry pie, etc. Supper—nearly the same as breakfast."5 It's doubtful that Bill grew up hungry.

Well fingered and worn, Will Sr.'s journal and account book for a portion of 1822 survives in the Cincinnati Historical Society, rescued after many years as an object of amusement in a local bank. The elder Dennison not only noted his accounts in the journal, but revealed a delightful sense of whimsy along with his limited mastery of the written word.

"Lodging and board--$2.00 per week."

"Wednesday evening Dutch lady began board and her husben on friday with mair and colt."

"Young man with ague began board."

"Mr. Nelson and frind began board. Frind paid the bill."

"Two men with monkey began board on Monday."

"At breakfast 6 Kentuckians."

"Two Dutch ladies at supper."

"Young man with hors 1.00."

"Young man paid for two wiman."

"Sick man for licker, pt. whiskey."

"Friend quaker to super."

"Settled acct. with cook paid her $1.00 week."6 Unlike many of his generation, Bill grew up in a cosmopolitan, if provincial, atmosphere, exposed to the intellectual and
societal warp and woof of his day. In another entry, six year old Bill Jr. appears for the first time. "March 31, William begun scool at Mr. Wings."7

William Wing was a pioneer teacher who built his school on the southeast corner of Sixth and Vine in 1822 as a private venture, though in later years it was incorporated into the Cincinnati public schools. A substantial structure, it doubled as a public theatre in its early years. Young Bill and his classmates entered from Sixth Street into a large auditorium and took seats, boys on the east side and girls on the west, facing a raised platform upon which Mr. Wing sat enthroned behind a sturdy table, every squirming pupil under his stern eye.8

Walking to Mr. Wing's must have been a daily adventure for six year old Bill. Out he marched with his chalk and slate into the busy street, crowded with all the color and excitement of the major entrepôt of the American West. He might jump for his life into a sheltering doorway as swirls of grunting, squealing hogs washed by on their way to slaughterhouses by the riverfront, churning the muddy street with their trotters, while sweating, swearing drovers flailed with their staves and arched amber cascades of tobacco juice to glint in the sunlight. Passing Upper Market House he could clear his senses with the scent of mounded fruits, vegetables, cheeses, hams, bacon, and all
the good things that local farmers hauled into town for sale. Perhaps Mary and the cook accompanied him this far to shop for the day’s groceries. Here he might also see caravans of immigrants stopping to provision and barter on their way west. Some sickly and ill clad, with gangs of round eyed children in tow, others more prosperous, they likely gave "Kentuc" or "Virginy" as their origin, and "Wabash" as their destination. From the pillory in Church Alley behind the county jail Bill could hear the oaths and cries of a brawling waterman; drunken Indian, or unfortunate black, hauled off for punishment on order of the magistrate. Perhaps he sneaked away to Fifth Street hoping to glimpse the elephant, tiger, or camel of the wild animal show. At the sound of a horn he could stop to watch the stage from Hamilton, Dayton, and the Miami Valley swing into town with sweating horses, tinkling harness bells, and debonair teamster. But perhaps his greatest excitement came from the sounds wafting up the street from the waterfront, the long piercing wail of steam whistles from the dozens of river boats crowding the landings. Steam powered river traffic was only five years old in 1822 Cincinnati; but already, the prosperity of the Queen City and the region was fueled by steamboats bringing rich cargoes upriver on regular schedules and carrying western produce quickly and reliably downstream to world markets. The steamboat's siren
call was the music of adventure, mystery, modernity and wonder to young and old alike. 9

Sycamore Grove School:

"2 May, William left up going to scool." With this entry in the Dennison House ledger, Bill's career at Wing's School apparently ended a month after it began. William Wing died about this time, and that may be why young Dennison "left up," though Wing's son ran the school successfully for several more years. In any event, Will Sr. and Mary had another adventure in mind for Bill. 10

It was probably as late as 1827 when young Dennison enrolled in Sycamore Grove School at Paddy's Run in Butler County, about 25 miles from Cincinnati. He may have had other elementary education in Cincinnati in the intervening five years, perhaps with the younger Wing, but there is no record of it. Sycamore Grove School was an imposing two story white frame building highlighted in blue, with two large dormitories for the boys, a lecture hall, smaller classrooms, a dining hall, kitchen, and living quarters for the owner/schoolmaster and his family. Sycamore Grove was the first boarding school in the Cincinnati area and it was a success, gaining a reputation for quality education during its few years of operation. 11

The driving force at Sycamore Grove was William Bebb, then twenty-five years old, the son of early Welsh migrants
who became successful farmers and upon whose land the school was built. In 1802 William Bebb may have been the first white child born west of the Great Miami River, where his parents lived in a true wilderness with few neighbors and in real danger from Indians. Young William was educated by his parents, particularly by his mother. He soon showed talent for teaching boys in area schools, most notably in the one at the home of future president William Henry Harrison at North Bend. Secondary schools were often private ventures in early Ohio, and the younger Bebb soon persuaded his father and some Cincinnati investors to back him in a boarding school catering to the sons of the prosperous. Bebb and his wife Sarah ran the school together, Bebb teaching and Sarah shepherding a small staff of servants to look after her rambunctious charges.12

William Bebb was an idealistic frontier scholar and something of a renaissance man. Clear headed and ambitious, he studied law at night after he sent his boys to bed in their unheated garret dormitories. In 1831, the year Bill Dennison left to enter Miami University, Bebb was admitted to the Ohio bar, closed his school, and was soon a prominent Whig politician. He served as governor of Ohio from 1846 to 1848, after which he retired to a substantial farm in Illinois where he sponsored European immigrants and championed Republican causes until his death in 1873.13
Bill Dennison learned more than his letters, numbers, and a love of history and politics from Bebb. The young schoolmaster was caught up in the fire and idealism of his generation, and he championed the liberal causes of his time. He was staunchly antislavery, and, when he became governor, opposed the Mexican War as a conquest to extend slave territory. Yet he loyally raised state troops for the war at the call of President Polk, arguing that it was Ohioans' duty to support the central government. He spoke clearly and forcefully at a time when many Cincinnati merchants were prepared to equivocate on slavery to protect their rich Southern trade: "Slavery is a moral evil, the darkest and most unnatural that disgraces our free institutions." He argued that slavery was holding back the economic development of the South, and by extension that of the entire nation. He championed repeal of state Black Laws which restricted the civil rights of free blacks in Ohio, and was accused of favoring "Negro equality," almost universally anathema to white Ohioans of the day. He argued for state-supported education and for public funding of internal improvements such as canals, highways, and the new marvels of the age, steam railroads. He was for sound currency and private banking. Bebb was an unabashed idealistic republican with a small "r," arguing for civic virtue and for public-spirited citizens prospering consensually in a community of laws.
These were heady thoughts during young Bill Dennison's formative years, filling the lad with dreams of national destiny, of equality before the law, of America as God's chosen place, of ever-expanding horizons, and they became lifelong influences upon him. But there was one more academic experience to shape his intellect before he set out to make his way in the world.

**Miami University:**

The little college with the pretentious name at Oxford, Ohio had been open only seven years when sixteen-year-old Bill Dennison enrolled in 1831. Two substantial buildings dominated the campus which was located at the east side of town. Main Building was a three-story brick structure atop a slight hill, housing classrooms, library, chapel, administrative rooms, and some student and faculty dormitories. Behind Main to the east was a new dormitory called East Building, also built of site-made red brick and three stories high. Along the brick path to town, was the "President's Mansion," originally a log schoolhouse that had been sheathed in boards, painted red, and augmented by a white frame second story and two wings, one a bedroom and another the kitchen. The campus was set off on the town side by a decorative post and rail wooden fence, also painted white. Mature native oaks and elms graced the grounds, spared the ax during construction, and provided
welcome shade in the hot summers. To the east and south stood thick stands of native forest, known about campus as the "botanical gardens." The town of Oxford was a modest affair of less than a thousand souls. The main economic activity was serving the campus and surrounding farmers, though over twenty tanneries and distilleries also operated in and near the town. Several establishments called "groceries" catered to campus residents and did offer provender, but in reality most were grogshops where strong spirits and other vices waited to snare the scholars. The Indian camps that had been common at the edge of town as late as 1826 were more rare in 1831, and tales of war hoops and "sculpins" had passed into folklore. But the area had not entirely lost its backwoods charm; it was infested by chiggers, rattlesnakes, copperheads, skunks, and various other undesirables of the time. Woodsmoke scented the breeze, townsfolk and farmers sauntered by on their business, and a general bucolic air enveloped town and gown alike.16

As Bill dragged his belongings to his lodgings in the fall of 1831, he was one of 192 students enrolled that year. He could have lived in town but, with the opening of East Building two years before, the administration encouraged students to lodge on campus by including the cost of rooms in the tuition, except for a five dollar
"servant's fee." Students provided their own furniture. Tuition cost Bill's father $24 for ten months of instruction that year, payable in two installments for the two five-month semesters. Lodging in town would have cost between $1 and $1.50 a week, laundry extra. Bill probably had a room with a bed, cupboard, table, chair, and lamp, augmented by his trunk. The room came with a cast iron stove, not only for warmth, but because he was expected to do much of his own cooking. Under the bed he might have a box of potatoes, onions, apples, and similar storables, with perhaps a bit of cured ham, bacon or cheese in a tin to keep out the vermin. Cooling on the windowsill might be a clay pitcher of milk. Water drawn from the creek across from the tannery discharge filled a jug in a basin by the corner. As a young man of some means, Bill may have enjoyed the luxury of a little coffee and sugar, perhaps a full tea caddy, and Mary may have slipped some dried or candied fruits into his trunk. She may also have seen to a small rug by the bed, and to soap and towels. He was expected to provide his own fuel, an added expense of four or five dollars, and he may have found that the previous occupant, perhaps facing a stiff bill from a "grocery," had burned the door and window casings as an economy measure! A homespun classmate wrote home expressing the universal concern of the scholar before and since over sustenance of
the body as well as the soul. "I have just light my lamp, and drew my table up near the fire, and locked my door, and commenced to wright...I have a first-rate chicken on boiling which I bought yesterday already cleaned for the pot. It is now boiling and it smells so good that I can hardly wright. What a feast I will have just now!!" 17 No doubt Bill's tenure with Wing and Bebb spared him his friend's diction, grammar, and spelling, but Bill too may have locked the door when his cookpot cast its spell.

Presiding over the campus was Reverend Robert Hamilton Bishop, Doctor of Divinity, Professor of History and of the Philosophy of Social Relations. Bishop and his wife had immigrated from Scotland to the frontier of northwestern Kentucky and southern Ohio Territory in 1802. For the first two years in his new land, this Presbyterian minister rode a circuit in the wilderness, preaching wherever he could gather a congregation. In 1804 he joined the faculty of Transylvania College in Lexington, Kentucky, the premier institution of higher learning in the West at the time. Here he taught philosophy, belles-lettres, logic, mathematics, and astronomy! As one writer has observed, he was a tall but not a narrow man. Surviving a tiff with his church over his service in a non-sectarian school, he gained a reputation for earnestness and civility as well as for dedicated teaching and concern for his students. In 1824 he
was offered the presidency of a new college in the woods of Ohio and he had been there since. Another shining light on the faculty was Reverend William H. McGuffey (written M'Guffey in the college catalogue), author of a series of schoolbooks bearing his name that would dominate American secondary education for over a century. This self-confident Don in his silk hat and shiny bombazine suit cut a wide swath through the campus. He taught philosophy, rhetoric, and criticism, along with Greek and Hebrew classics. Professors Rev. J. W. Scott (Astronomy and Chemistry), Rev. T. Armstrong (Latin, Greek and Hebrew), and S. W. McCracken (Mathematics), rounded out the faculty, assisted by three or four tutors from year to year.

"There shall be prayers every morning and evening by the President or his substitute at 6 A.M. and 6 P.M." So mandated the Board of Trustees, and so did the academic day begin and end. In between students attended relatively few faculty lectures, since they were expected to master their subjects by study and by the aid of tutors where necessary. Classroom contact with the faculty came in the form of three or four periods each day during which the instructor orally quizzed his students on their lessons. These "recitations" were mostly stilted affairs in which hapless lads parroted lessons by rote. But the experience also encouraged many a young man to hone his ability to think fast on
his feet and to "stand and deliver" a convincing performance—whether he knew his lesson or not! Since many of the graduates went on to become lawyers or ministers, this was no doubt a most practical exercise. Devoted to experimenting with innovative teaching techniques, McGuffey, like Socrates, was known to reverse the procedure, having his students quiz him during recitation and expounding upon the answers. First year students studied Greek, Latin, Geography, Roman Antiquities, Algebra, Geometry, and Plane Trigonometry. Sophomores labored through more Latin and Greek, Grecian Antiquities, Spherical Trigonometry, Applications of Algebra and Geometry, and Elements of Rhetoric and Criticism. Juniors shouldered Advanced Mathematics, Mental Philosophy, Greek Oration, Hebrew Grammar, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, and a modern language. Seniors mastered Astronomy, Chemistry, Botany, History and the Philosophy of Social Relations, Mineralogy, Geology, Practical Mathematics, Greek and Latin Classics, and Logic. This was an elitest curriculum, no doubt, seen from a late 20th century perspective. In large part it simply replicated that of older and more prestigious colleges in the East and in Europe. The idea that knowledge was a body of immutable truth was still popular in the early nineteenth century, though the inclusion of practical applications for mathematics reflects an increasing concern
with preparing students for a world of change. Higher education as the province of clerics was also part of the common convention, even though lay professors were becoming increasingly common, as Bill found at Miami. Fifty years after the American Revolution, egalitarian ideals were prospering in America, though in practice more so for white male Protestants than for others. The purpose of the curriculum was to educate an elite from among the scions of the Western self-made prosperous and, in the case of several students of quite modest means, from among the most ambitious. Few young men attended college in the 1830s, and, rich or poor, they were seen as a nascent elite ordained at graduation to serve society through their professions, and to inspire by the example of their life achievements.21 To the first generation sons of the Founding Fathers who started the college and who adopted the curriculum, egalitarianism was the ideal, but it was egalitarianism of opportunity, not of entitlement.

Once or twice a week Bill and his classmates, wearing the colored rosettes that identified them as members, trooped after vespers into Main Building to meetings of student-led literary societies. Here the lads presented papers and debated not only the great ideas from their course work—Greek and Roman philosophy, the Federalist Papers, Locke, Hume, and Adam Smith—but the great issues
of the day as reported in the frontier press. Bill wore the white rosette of the Union Literary Society, and took his turn as secretary in 1833, adding his minutes to those of debates over Indian removal, the nullification controversy, the Bank of the United States imbroglio, and the propriety of federal and state funding of internal improvements.

While there is no record of a debate over the role of Peggy O'Neale Eaton in Jackson's cabinet, undoubtedly the juicy gossip was not ignored by the young men. The literary societies were encouraged, in fact often monitored, by the faculty as an integral part of college life. While some modern scholars have argued that these student-led organizations should be seen as vehicles for student protest against the traditional curriculum, it is not clear that such was the case in Dennison's experience at Miami. In fact, Bill was part of the movement to bring Greek societies to campus. These fraternities, rather than the literary societies, were the expressions of youthful rebellion over control by the faculty at the time. He was a founding member of the Miami chapter of Alpha Delta Phi fraternity, though it is not clear whether this was in his senior year on campus or in Cincinnati shortly after his graduation.22

But Bill's Miami experience was by no means an exercise in staid orthodoxy. This was a yeasty time, from which can
be traced the beginnings of a generational change. Bill's was the generation of Longfellow, Poe, Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau, of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Harriet Tubman, of Thaddeus Stevens, Frederick Douglass, Jefferson Davis, and Abraham Lincoln. While Bill was at Miami, Victoria began her reign, slavery was abolished in the British Empire, Santa Anna became ruler of Mexico, a pandemic of cholera swept the globe, Charles Darwin set sail in the Beagle, social agitation bubbled in Europe, and the word "socialism" first entered the lexicon. Andrew Jackson was president and a grass roots political rebellion against the established order in America was underway in his name. In its formative years, this generation was spared the terrors of war and the perils of founding a new nation that so marked their fathers' and grandfather's generations. Taking as given what their forebearers had achieved, they focused their attention impatiently on what had not been achieved. In righteous fervor, they, in their turn, would lead their children's generation into the Nation's greatest carnage. They experimented with new ideas and ways of life, with religious revival, new sects, and transcendentalism. They questioned inherited values while often embracing hardened idealism, even intolerance. In 1831 the electrifying news of a bloody slave revolt led by Nat Turner in Southampton Parish, Virginia, reached the campus, making the issue of
slavery sharp and visceral. Uncompromising antislavery idealists were appearing in the society, such as William Lloyd Garrison who began his abolitionist newspaper The Liberator in that same year. By Bill's senior year, Theodore Dwight Weld was holding abolitionist revivals at Lane Seminary in Cincinnati and touring Ohio with his antislavery message. This hardening of attitudes toward the enslavement of black people entered the campus debate and divided the faculty as well as the students, with Bishop and one faction preaching emancipation, and McGuffey making clear his reservations. Several Miami students were Southerners with pro-slavery views, and many had family ties to the South.

Judging from his later writings and speeches, Bill was by this time forming ideas that he would hold at least through the Civil War, and in many cases for life. He grew to firmly oppose slavery, but was not optimistic about the potential for integrating freed blacks into the American economy or society. In this respect he shared the view of most whites of the time and differed from ardent abolitionists such as Weld who argued for full acceptance of blacks into society as "brothers in Christ." Dennison favored colonization of black people somewhere beyond the borders of the United States, though he seems never to have advocated forced expatriation of the kind imposed upon the
eastern Indians by President Jackson. Dennison was for sound banking by private bankers, for government aid for internal improvements to be built and managed by private entrepreneurs, and for a strong Union. In short, Bill Dennison was shaping ideas compatible with the new Whig party that was forming in 1833 from the wreckage of the National Republicans, ideas which would make him a founding member of the Republican Party in 1856.24

Another influence upon Dennison's character was a double dose of prickly resentment over perceived provinciality. In this he shared the sensibilities of many Westerners, particularly native-born and educated Westerners, that they were bumpkins in the eyes of both Easterners and Europeans. The English traveler and social critic, Frances Trollope, had published her impressions of Cincinnati in 1827. They included an anecdote about the innkeeper who came to her room to inquire if she or her children were ill when she sent out for afternoon tea, since "we have no family tea drinking here...you must eat with me and my wife or not at all in my house." When Trollope remonstrated that she was a stranger and not accustomed to "the manners of the country," the indignant reply was "Our manners are very good, madam,...and we don't wish any changes from England!"25 Given his upbringing, this story must have stung young Dennison particularly, though the innkeeper in
question was not his father, but another Cincinnati worthy. James Fenimore Cooper, traveling in France about the same time, wrote "It certainly is a disadvantage to us that we are considered as a sort of beginners in every thing which [the French] call civilisée." They "seem to think it marvelous that an American can write." In a less belligerent tone but making a similar point about haughty Easterners, Daniel Drake, the self-taught physician, philosopher, naturalist, and Western booster, said in an address to Bill and his classmates at Miami in 1834: "Deep and enduring ignorance might be thought the lot of all who thus grow up in the forest; but observation has shown, that this condition of the mind is far more favorable to the reception of new truths, than that which prevails in the youth of older states of society. Hence the West is pre-eminently the place where discoveries and new principles of every kind, are received with avidity, and promptly submitted to the test of experiment." Bill shared these sensibilities and was developing a need to demonstrate his urbanity and to prove his refinement in a way that would cause some to judge him standoffish in later years and that would color much of his political life. He was also becoming an uncompromising patriot, even a chauvinist, on matters of region and nation. As a local politician, he would maneuver for local advantage; as a
Northern governor, he would be ardent for the Union; and, as a member of the Cabinet, he would be a consistent hardliner towards England, France, Mexico or any other power whose actions he saw as inimical to American interests.28

What else of Dennison's character during his Miami years? Fortunately a few glimpses can be gleaned from the writings of classmates who reminisced about him in their old age. One called him "the beauty of his class,...[with] sure social instinct," referring to his good looks and winning ways.29 Another called him "a handsome, slim youth, (and) a fairish scholar."30 An early photograph taken in the thirties or forties shows an earnest, handsome young man, with strong Nordic features, a mound of blond curls, and large, almost doleful eyes.31 He is variously described as an adequate or indifferent scholar, though excelling in belles lettres, history, and philosophy. He made friends easily. Among his classmates were James Birney, who would become lieutenant governor of Michigan, Chauncey Newell Olds, who would become attorney general of Ohio, John J. McRae, future governor of Mississippi, and Bill's close friend and fellow Cincinnatian William S. Groesbeck with whom he collaborated to form the chapter of Alpha Delta Phi in 1835. (Groesbeck later gained national recognition as the lead defense counsel for President Andrew Johnson in his impeachment trial before the United
States Senate. Dennison's experience at Miami was happy and successful; he was bright, personable, and involved.

At Bill Groesbeck's graduation in 1834, Dennison listened to President Bishop proclaim the inevitable and progressive upwards march of society, "by the actions of improved and cultivated minds upon each other." Dennison knew that his was, and was expected to be, one of those improved and cultivated minds, destined "to exert extensive influence" upon American society. At Bill's commencement the next year, Bishop enjoined the graduates to see themselves as public property, consecrated to the public good, as the select, chosen by a beneficent society to lead. Like his parents' generation who had been so confidently optimistic in 1815, Dennison and his classmates were equally so in 1835, but for different reasons. The elders had been proud of their achievement of peace and enticed by the promise of prosperity and self-fulfillment. Their sons accepted peace and opportunity as their birthright, and were filled by a sense of self-righteousness and destiny.
ENDNOTES

CHAPTER I


5 Hill, Inns and Hotels, 7.


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Rodabaugh, Bishop, 63.


Robert H. Bishop, Address to the Graduates of Miami University, September 27, 1834, (Hamilton, Ohio: Joseph G. Monfort, Publisher, 1835), 6-7. Robert H. Bishop, An Address Delivered September 30th, 1835, to the Graduates of Miami University, (Oxford: 1835), The Walter Havinghurst Special Collections, Miami University, 4-5.


24Strauss and Howe, Generations, ibid; Ohio, Executive Documents, 1859, (Columbus: Richard Nevins, State Printer, 1860), 163-180.

25Hill, Inns and Hotels, 14.


30Havinghurst, Men of Old Miami, 65.

31William Dennison Photograph Collection, The Ohio State Historical Society.

33 Bishop, *Commencement Address, 1834*, 4 - 5.

34 ____*, *Commencement Address, 1835*, 3 - 5.
CHAPTER II
BRANCHING OUT

"Annus Mirabilis," penned a contemporary, describing 1835 Cincinnati. He referred to the economic recovery that was underway following the crash of 1832, and to the optimistic spirit that infused the city that fall as William Dennison Jr. made his way home, armed with his diploma from Miami University. William Neil rode the wave of prosperity and inaugurated 36-hour stage service from Cincinnati to his base in Columbus, cementing his domination over stage travel in Ohio. The Neil family would play a dominant role in young Dennison's future. As the graduate moved back home to Dennison House, William Sr. was planning yet another expansion and renovation. An illustrated advertisement in the city directory shows the outcome. A handsome illuminated sign stood atop a pedestal on the sidewalk in front of the entrance, facing up and down Main Street, and proclaiming the name "Dennison" to travelers approaching from either direction on the thoroughfare. An imposing four-story facade with colonnaded balconies fronted Main, and a penthouse topped by a rounded cupola graced the roof.¹

32
Cincinnati was growing and prospering, yet it was also groping to rise above its bumpkin image and unflattering epithet "Porkopolis." In 1835, Daniel Drake hosted a visit to the city by Harriet Martineau, a writer and social commentator from England. He proudly showed her the fine home and busy slaughterhouse of a man who had been his servant some years before, and who had risen to become a prosperous hog baron worth $10,000, a tidy fortune at the time. Miss Martineau suppressed her amusement. She went on to sample the social life of the city, replete with practical-minded nouveau riche, fashionable dress, and affectations of Eastern society. The backwoods crudeness that bemused Frances Trollope a decade earlier had given way to self-conscious refinement and diffidence. Harriet Martineau did nothing to assuage the sensitivity of Dennison and other native Westerners when she referred to Cincinnati society as showing "a noticeable degree of self-consciousness and pedantry." 2

Pride in achievement, competent individualism, and resentment of perceived provincialism set the tone of the times as Dennison set out to put his education to use by learning a profession. He had decided to become a lawyer and, no doubt with a good deal of help from his well-connected father, sought out a mentor to introduce him to the bar.
Reading the Law:

Aspiring lawyers did not attend law schools in early nineteenth-century Ohio; they apprenticed, or "read the law," with practicing attorneys. Some lawyers abused this relationship, particularly if the apprentice was poor and without connections. They used them as janitors, errand runners, scriveners, and, in the case of huskier lads, as strongarm debt collectors. In time the acolyte might be allowed to draft a brief or attend court as an aide. To many lawyers, the extent of their obligation and interest was allowing their apprentice access to law books. When the sponsor considered an aspirant ready to practice, he "introduced him to the bar," which usually meant that the lawyer petitioned the state circuit court to appoint examiners to judge the applicant's qualifications. When admitted to practice, the new lawyer could ply his trade in any Ohio court. Formal examination by a state central board did not begin in Ohio until 1901.3

Some enlightened eastern practices were allowing their apprentices, often called law clerks, a small stipend by 1835, but that was not the custom at the Cincinnati bar. Apprentices financed themselves. While enjoying the advantages of living at home, Dennison no doubt felt the need to contribute to his own upkeep while he studied law, so, probably in 1836, he joined a hardware and dry goods
business in partnership with his brother-in-law Benjamin B. Reynolds, at 69 Main Street, a few doors down from Dennison House. 4

Neither poor nor ill-connected, Dennison landed a plum apprenticeship in the office of Nathaniel Pendleton, one of the leading citizens of Cincinnati and a man with an impeccable pedigree. Pendleton's great grandfather had migrated from England to Virginia one hundred years before the Declaration of Independence. His father Henry was a Revolutionary War hero, later a member of the Constitutional Congress in Philadelphia, a New York judge, and a second to Alexander Hamilton in his duel with Aaron Burr. Nathaniel was a veteran of the War of 1812 who moved to Cincinnati in 1818 to practice law. By 1835 he had a wide and successful practice, was a prominent Whig politician, and had been a state senator. 5

In addition to his other interests, Pendleton was a practicing trial attorney, and Dennison no doubt accompanied him to the Old Court House in its grassy circle at the end of Court Street to watch the worthies of the Cincinnati bar ply their craft. Municipal Court was on the first floor, and the state district court, or Superior Court, reigned majestically on the second. City barristers argued a variety of civil and criminal cases, from murder to steamboat collisions to petty thievery. Dennison probably
sat at his mentor's elbow at one of the long lawyer's tables facing the bench, busy with his notes and briefs, and gazed at the ugly prisoner's cage where as many as six or eight unfortunates who had run afoul of the law might be on display during a day's business. A large cast-iron stove glowed in season, reflected in the several oversized spit­toons scattered about the striped rag carpet. Arguments ran the gamut from sound to weak. One young barrister confidently defended a client charged with shooting from the bank and killing a man on a steamboat. He argued that the river was outside the court's jurisdiction since Virginia had ceded the Northwest Territory only to the northern low-water line of the Ohio. The judge deflated his case with a lecture on concurrent jurisdiction. Surveying the competition at the Old Court House, an Eastern lawyer contemplating opening a practice in town observed,"... neither Court particularly awed me, and though I eyed the lawyers closely, they did not appear as if competition with them would be desperate."6 Desperate or not, Pendleton judged Dennison ripe for the bar in 1840, and sponsored his admission to practice.7

The Campaign of 1840:

By 1840 a major transformation had taken place in American politics. The old party structure of Federalists and Jeffersonian Democrats had given way in the 1820s to
the rise of the new Democrats led by Andrew Jackson. For a

time in the late 1820s and early 1830s these new Democrats

became, in the words of one historian, "a single, bloated

party encompassing virtually the entire political society,

a task [they] quickly found difficult to accomplish." A

new opposition party arose, and by 1840 the Whigs were

prepared to challenge the Democrats in both federal and

local elections. These political developments played out

in Cincinnati and its environs as well. During his years as

a law student and merchant, Dennison became increasingly

familiar with the major issues of the day that were to

shape his professional and political life.

One such issue was government control of banking and

currency. This was part of the national debate, but

Dennison, with his strong ties to merchant and professional

circles, encountered it first hand in bustling Cincinnati.

Distance from eastern money sources, difficulties in trans­

portation, and the general orientation of trade down the

Mississippi to New Orleans rather than to the East combined

to cause a shortage of credit and currency in the West.

Private banking filled the gap, extending credit to farmers

and merchants and issuing private banknotes which circula­

ted as currency. The same devil-may-care spirit that

infected society in general during succeeding good times

led to increased demand for credit and to over-expansion of
private currency issue. In good times private banking flourished, was occasionally corrupt, was often inept, and ended in a flurry of overexpansion. The result was periodic sharp economic contractions, called "panics," such as occurred in 1819, 1826, 1832, and 1837. The panics of 1819 and 1837 were particularly severe, each lasting several years, so that banking was a major issue in the election of 1840. Merchants, nascent industrialists, and farmers welcomed easy credit and the resultant prosperity, but complained bitterly when the inevitable panic threatened ruin. At such times the electorate cried for return to specie and for curtailment or outright prohibition of private banking. Ohio Democrats took the lead of their national party and called for a state subtreasury system, whereby banking services would be provided by branch offices of the treasury throughout the state, financed by the deposit of state revenues. Whigs defended private banking, though perhaps strengthened by some state regulation of reserves and other practices.\(^{10}\)

Internal improvements were another issue. The term referred to what in later years Americans would call "infrastructure:" canals, roads, harbors, bridges, and similar projects designed to benefit the public, particularly commerce. By 1840, the age's new marvel, the steam railroad, fired the Ohioans' imagination, and numerous
private syndicates vied with each other to raise money, often public money, for railroad ventures. There was little political polarization in Cincinnati or Ohio over the desirability of internal improvements. Support was driven by business and commercial interests, and fueled by a general sense of growth and destiny in a boisterous young land that was shared by both parties. Some tensions could be found between rural and commercial interests, but the later usually prevailed. Although funding of internal improvements was a national issue, championed by such luminaries as Henry Clay in Congress, it was chiefly played out in state and local forums; furthermore, the real issue boiled down to who was in and who was out, and consequently to who controlled the patronage. As a Whig, Dennison championed private ownership and management of internal improvements, but with substantial public financing.

Another major issue at the national level was protective tariffs. The Nullification Controversy of 1828 and 1832 threatened to break the Union apart, as Southern planters objected to import tariffs designed to protect northern industrialists at the expense of cheaper European manufactures. Nationally, Democrats narrowly supported free trade, and Whigs, particularly New England Whigs, were for protection of domestic industry. As with internal improvements, tariffs were less of an issue in Ohio where both
parties were essentially protectionist. Cincinnati was increasingly a manufacturing center and protectionism appealed to manufacturing interests. Soap making and iron-works vied with pork packing for the top spot in the local economy. Westerners also harbored a sense of chauvinism towards other nations that sometimes masked their economic self-interest in this regard.\textsuperscript{12} Dennison's sense of prickly patriotism was reinforced by the tariff issue. As with many of his generation, that issue would color his attitude towards the relationship of the United States to other nations throughout his life.

As much as national concerns enlivened Ohio politics, local Cincinnati politics were more a matter of which side controlled City Hall than one of deep divisive ideology. Commercial interests dominated city politics, and there was relatively little disagreement about what should be done, only about who should do it.\textsuperscript{13} Yet this conclusion allows another observation about politics of the period that was also to influence Dennison's career. The strong-minded individualists who made up political life at the time felt few inhibitions about making new alliances to further their interests and convictions. Salmon P. Chase, future Ohio governor, federal Treasury Secretary, and Chief Justice, was at the time breaking with conservative Whigs in Cincinnati over slavery and would soon join a loose special
interest group known as the Liberty Party, which advocated abolition. Less than a decade later he would be elected to the United States Senate by a coalition of Free Soilers and Democrats in the state legislature. By 1855 he would change parties again and join the Republicans, concluding that his antislavery views were accepted there and that a political party needed more than one issue in order to be viable. The relative ease with which Americans shifted political allegiance during this period gave politics a kaleidoscopic quality that often frustrates the late twentieth century observer. This easy shifting of party affiliation reflected principle, personal interest, and ambition, no doubt, but also a sense that personal reputation and societal status would not be jeopardized by the move. In fact, in the age of Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and John C. Calhoun, it was strong-minded individuals of conviction who legitimatized and popularized political parties. With one great and tragic exception—slavery—American political differences were over means, not ends. Dennison too would change parties as the Whigs faded and the Republicans ascended, and would see the move as a means of vindicating his convictions.

Other social issues bubbled in 1840 and energized portions of the electorate. Cincinnati was becoming somewhat cosmopolitan as many new immigrants flocked to the
city seeking their fortunes. A nascent strain of class struggle sparked in New York among working-class Democrats as the Locofoco faction and spread West, expending most of its energies in the anti-banking movement. Nativism was the reaction of native-born Protestants of English-speaking descent against the influx of new immigrants unlike themselves. But the great issue that had been building since independence like a huge and menacing thundercloud on the national horizon was the relation between black and white people. Cincinnati had become a haven for blacks seeking a better life; by 1840 about 2000 had settled there. While the great majority of Ohioans proudly supported the prohibition of slavery promulgated in the Northwest Ordinance and reaffirmed in the state constitution, few believed in the equality of the races. Working-class whites complained that blacks took their jobs and worked for lower wages. Ohio enacted Black Laws, restricting access to the courts, the franchise, and service in the militia for black people, and requiring that they post a surety bond before taking up residence in the state. These and other discriminatory practices resulted in bloody race riots in Cincinnati in 1826 and 1841, and many black residents were driven from the city.15

As divisive as the matter of free resident blacks was, that of escaped slaves was more so. Many Ohioans secretly
aided escaped slaves, in violation of the fugitive slave provision of the Constitution and of the federal Fugitive Slave Law. Many others, particularly in southern Ohio, supported the return of fugitive slaves to their masters, some out of acceptance of slavery, some out of respect for the Constitution, and some out of fear of alienating Southern trading interests. In 1837, Salmon P. Chase defended an escaped slave named Matilda, who had been living as a free woman in Cincinnati, against a Missourian named Laurence, her former owner, who sued for her return. The case was sensationalized by the allegation that Matilda was Laurence's natural daughter as well as his slave. Chase lost the case, and barely secured the release of Matilda's white Cincinnati employer, who was subsequently charged with harboring a fugitive. The unfortunate Matilda was returned forcibly to slavery and, in the parlance of the times, "sold down river." In reaction to Chase's spirited advocacy, and to the resultant public outcry against him, the Ohio legislature passed a state fugitive slave law in 1839, as a companion to the federal statute, with most of the support coming from Democrats and the opposition from a collection of liberal Whigs and abolitionists. Dennison was no doubt as incensed as many other young liberals of his generation by the outcome, and his antislavery views were strengthened. There is no record that the haughty
Chase took notice of Dennison the law clerk during this period, though their paths must have crossed at the Old Court House, but, in little more than a decade, he would.

These issues played out in the tumultuous presidential campaign of 1840. Andrew Jackson had retired in 1837, handing the presidency and the leadership of his party to Martin Van Buren, who was increasingly unable to hold together the large and diverse Democratic Party. The Whigs snubbed their warhorse and champion, Henry Clay, for William Henry Harrison, war hero and country squire from North Bend. In the resultant "rip-roaring" campaign, the Whigs combined appeal to a variety of dissatisfactions among the electorate with artful political drama. Great rallies were held featuring log cabins, coonskins, canoes, and oceans of hard cider, all allusions to Harrison's supposed frontier commoner roots. The great Whig rally at Dayton in September may have been attended by as many as fifty thousand Ohioans, a huge turnout given the population of the time. A participant in the Columbus Whig rally in February reported a log cabin on wheels "filled with the yeomanry of the land," and "at different intervals canoes, loaded with ladies and drawn by six span of horses..." A full rigged ship also rumbled by on wheels, escorted by horsemen, local military clubs, banners, and other merry-makers, all having a rip-roaring good time. The locus
of Democratic strength was centered on wage laborers in Cincinnati and other cities, and their disciplined marches in ranks through the streets, rhythmically striking war clubs against the ground, were insufficient to drum up a victory. Whigs swept state and national offices, amid choruses of "Tippecanoe and Tyler too," and "Van, Van, he's a used up man." 19

1840 marked a change of direction for William Dennison Jr. as well as his party. He was now a lawyer, and his mentor Pendleton was elected to Congress from the Cincinnati district on Harrison's coattails. Pendleton was soon off to Washington, leaving Dennison to find his own way in the world. 1840 was also the year that Dennison married Anne Eliza Neil of Columbus, daughter of William Neil, owner of the largest stage line in the state, founder of the Neil House in Columbus, and a major investor in local business and real estate. Anne was an intelligent and lively young woman of nineteen, petite and poised, with a noticeable regal bearing that drew comment from contemporaries. She would bear twelve children, outlive nine of them as well as her husband, and be an involved, active booster of Dennison's career throughout his life. 20 Many years later, Giddeon Welles wrote of Anne and her husband: "Of the two, she is smarter...," and went on to opine that she was also the more ambitious. 21 The couple made their
home at Dennison House where their first child, William Neil, was born December 10, 1841. Some time in the early 1840's they moved to Columbus where Dennison opened a practice, though the precise time is unclear. He was secretary of the Cincinnati First Ward Whig Committee in August of 1841, and is listed in the Cincinnati city directories of 1842 and 1843 as living at Dennison House. The 1843 Columbus directory lists him residing in that city on the east side of High Street, between Gay and Broad. William and Anne probably moved to Columbus in 1842, and he might have continued to buy a listing in the Cincinnati directory for a year or so as a sort of professional insurance to protect his embryonic law practice. He also seems to have left the hardware business to Reynolds, and eschewed any interest in the hotel business. About this time his younger brother Erasmus is also listed in the directory, evidently in business with William Sr. managing Dennison House. The patronage of the Neil family, political success of his party, the seat of state government, and the promise of a new practice in a growing area, all no doubt influenced William Dennison Jr. to strike out to a new town.

Columbus in the 1840s:

"Columbus is not striking in appearance" wrote a New England visitor in October, 1842. Neil House was "a great
pile...very imperfectly furnished," and "the houses are built with little regard to architectural design,... [the city,] spreading over a dead plain, you are afforded no favorable points of view." 24 Anne's point of view was favorable, no doubt, as she returned to her birthplace and to her friends and family. The imposing stone State House that would grace the center of the city by the end of the next decade was but an ugly scar by a heap of foundation stones, livestock grazing on the grounds. Chain gangs sweated in the sun as they labored for private contractors to whom they had been leased, before marching back to the State Penitentiary to hear Bible lectures and eat their evening meal of cornbread in enforced silence, as dictated by the penology of the times. The population was growing rapidly; in 1834 there were less than 4000 people in the city and by 1850 there would be over 17,000. Streets were unpaved, as in most Ohio cities, dusty and muddy by turns, though many had elevated sidewalks of brick or boards.25 Residents of the young Western towns of the day threw their garbage into the streets and alleys, to be grubbed up by pigs, picked over by chickens, or ground into the pulp of mud and manure by other livestock. City ordinances introduced about this time prohibiting the practice were not popular until medical practitioners could convince the community of the benefits of public sanitation. One worthy
matron railed at her husband, "Alexander, we are forbidden to throw ashes or garbage into the street. Now what shall we do?" Alexander's response is not recorded.

The city's first balloon ascension took place on the Fourth of July, 1842; perhaps William, Anne, and baby Neil joined the crowd to marvel at the daring of the aerialists. Fashionable women, crowned with ribboned bonnets, wore long varicolored "street sweeper" frocks in the 1840's, bolstered by ample petticoats. Men's fashions still included the long blue forktailed coat with brass buttons, ruffled shirt, knee breeches, and stockings of earlier times; the more modish affected loose trousers and matching frock coats of the new style. Equestrianism was becoming the rage among the younger gentry, with fashionable damsels and tony gallants prancing about on high-tailed walkers. Some of the elder generation still drank tea from their saucers, and tittering children were admonished by young mothers that such was proper manners in olden times. Social life included balls, soirees, and shivarees, flavored, as might be expected, by politics. The first Ohio governor's inaugural ball was held in 1842, as Democrat Wilson Shannon celebrated his second term, and his defeat of Whig Tom Corwin, who had ousted him in the landslide of 1840. The ins and outs of party politics were the life blood of Columbus society as well as the livelihood of many residents. Inevitably,
party politics in the state legislature became intertwined with city matters, and a running dispute occurred in the late 1830's and 1840's in which Democrats threatened to move the capitol to any of various other cities, while Whigs championed Columbus. In September 1842, William Dennison Jr. appears for the first time in a political article in a Columbus newspaper, as secretary to a committee of leading citizens investigating an accusation by Democratic legislators that a mob of Whig townsfolk had intimidated them. The committee concluded that there was neither a mob nor any disrespect to the legislature or its officers during the incident, but rather a good-humored gathering of sporting souls. This was within a month of Dennison's meeting with his ward committee in Cincinnati, a strong indication that he was already known in influential Columbus circles.27

Early Railroads:

Dennison was soon involved in the promotion of railroads, an enterprise that he would pursue until the last decade of his life. Ohio was still completing an extensive system of canals in the 1840s, connecting the Ohio River to Lake Erie. But canals were plagued by low water in summer and ice in winter, and the circuitous connection to the East across the Great Lakes to the Erie Canal was not the boon to commerce that earlier dreamers
had imagined. Railroads were all the rage. They could be built almost anywhere and were much faster than barges. 1840's locomotives could reach twenty miles an hour, while barges did not exceed four. But in the end it was the romance of modernity that seduced Americans to railroads in the nineteenth century, much as the automobile stole them away in the twentieth.28

Ohio's first railroad was a horse-drawn affair on wooden rails capped with iron bars, running from Toledo to Adrian, Michigan in 1832. The first line in the south was the Little Miami Railroad, which began service from Cincinnati north to Hamilton in 1842. Its management then embarked on an extension aimed at Xenia, prompting a group of Sandusky investors to organize the Mad River and Lake Erie Railroad, anticipating service from Xenia to Sandusky. This energized Columbus and Cleveland investors to promote a rail connection from Xenia to Columbus, and another from Columbus to Cleveland, to prevent their towns from losing the north-south trade. Richer prospects lay in a direct connection to the East. Eastern interests were pushing a line over the mountains that promised a connection to Wheeling, and Columbus investors were eager to to build the leg though Ohio to its capitol city.29

To the enterprising businessman, railroads represented the path to riches. Many railroad charters were secured
from the state legislature in the 1830s and 1840s by syndicates of local businessmen, but little was built. Railroads were expensive, and competent construction management was scarce. But the charters had value even if no track was laid, since they were vehicles for raising capital, and they granted the holders a limited monopoly over the route. That meant that a charter had value in itself and could be sold, often to the benefit of the original incorporators. In 1837 the legislature passed the "Plunder Law," so named by Democrats who charged that it was a license to plunder the treasury, authorizing the state to invest matching funds in domestic railroad ventures on a one-to-four ratio with private investors. Burdened by canal debt, the legislature repealed the act in 1842, but the syndicates were soon allowed to sell their stocks to municipalities and counties along their projected routes.30 This was the business climate that attracted Dennison, and, for the most part, he associated himself with successful ventures that did in the end build railroads, serve the public, and make money.

Dennison owed his early success in railroading to the patronage of the Neil family. William Neil, the patriarch, came to Ohio from Kentucky in 1815, settling in Columbus two years later. He farmed, entered banking, and opened a stage line. Shrewd acquisitions, sound partnerships, and
competent management soon garnered for Neil's Ohio Stage Company control of most stage and mail service in the state. He also invested heavily in Columbus real estate which in the long run became the basis of his family's fortune. Neil was quick to appreciate the future of railroads, not only to eclipse his stage business, but as lucrative investments. With his son Robert, he actively promoted railroad ventures, particularly those that promised to bring lines into Columbus. He was smart and energetic, and was involved in founding nine railroads. While not all prospered, Neil had a hand in all that did succeed. Close associates of the Neils in their enterprises, and therefore of Dennison, were William S. Sullivant and David Deshler, both prominent bankers, financiers, and lions of Ohio society.\textsuperscript{31}

The first railroad into Columbus was the Columbus and Xenia, a Neil and Dennison venture. The company was incorporated by Dennison and Joseph Ridgway, with financier and Democratic newspaperman, Samuel Medary, in 1844. William Neil served as president until enough money was raised to begin construction; he cleverly began to cultivate ridership before any track was laid by providing scheduled stage service under the Columbus and Xenia Railroad name from Columbus to Xenia, with through ticketing via the Little Miami Railroad to Cincinnati. Ohio pioneer railroad builder
Alfred Kelley succeeded Neil as president in 1847 to supervise construction, which was completed in early 1850 at a cost of $1.4 million. As the Columbus and Xenia's only locomotive, the "Washington," chugged over the Scioto River on its inaugural run in March, 1850, the Ohio State Journal rejoiced at the sight of the legislature on a complimentary junket, "going off at twenty five miles an hour." The Neils and their allies scored a major political and financial success when they convinced the legislature to build a short rail line, variously called the State or Penitentiary Railroad, connecting a quarry on the west bank of the Scioto River with the site of the new State House on the east bank, and with a stop en route at the State Penitentiary where convicts could dress the stones. In the process a railroad bridge over the Scioto was constructed with public money in addition to an excellent right-of-way into the heart of Columbus, elevated to escape river flooding. Another result of the state line, equally desired by Neil and Columbus financial circles, was that the large commitment of public money to build it settled recurrent questions over completion of the State House, thereby scuttling attempts to move the capitol from the city. A bit more lobbying secured for the Columbus and Xenia exclusive joint use of these valuable few miles of railroad, and effective full control after the completion of the State
House, thus saving the railroad the cost of building the bridge and elevated right-of-way. After his group's next major political coup of 1846, an act by the legislature authorizing municipalities to invest directly in railroad ventures, Dennison devoted himself to public fund raising. He addressed citizen rallies to drum up support for such investment, arguing that local farmers could obtain better prices if they could ship by rail to the Cincinnati market, that population would expand, and that the commercial position of Columbus would be greatly enhanced. The resulting public referendum was a victory for the Neil forces, and a subscription of $50,000 each from the city and the county was forthcoming. In time the Columbus and Xenia Railroad was a financial success, and its backers eventually secured a profitable merger with the Little Miami and later a lucrative lease of both lines to the Pennsylvania Railroad system.32

Dennison and the Neils were also involved in the Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati Railroad, the "Bee Line," begun by a Cleveland group to connect that city to the Columbus and Xenia Railroad in Columbus and on to Cincinnati via the Little Miami. In August 1847, Dennison became a director of the firm, cementing the Neil and Columbus connection. The Neil interests brought the redoubtable Kelley along as president for the construction
phase even while the Columbus and Zenia Railroad was still being built. The Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati reached Columbus in February 1851, sharing terminal facilities with the Columbus and Xenia and was a financial success from the start. Dennison was involved in several other railroad ventures in the 1840's and 1850's, some of which were never constructed, or were soon abandoned. The Central Ohio, a line east from Columbus to Wheeling, or Belaire on the Ohio side, was completed in 1854, with connections to the East. It was a troubled venture from the start, underfunded and poorly managed, and went into receivership in 1859. After the Civil War it became part of the Baltimore and Ohio system and was profitable. Dennison seems to have benefited financially from his railroad interests, subscribing to initial offerings which rose in value as the railroads prospered. As early as 1845 the Columbus and Xenia Railroad board of directors voted to buy back $185,000 worth of the firm's stock from individual board members. Dennison's financial security seemed assured.

Before the Bar:
Throughout his life, Dennison practiced his profession mostly as a solicitor. His interests were in furthering private and public ventures as an advocate, facilitator, and conciliator. But in 1846 his antislavery views drew him into court as a prosecutor.
On the evening of March 21, 1846, a Columbus black man named Jerry Finney was hired by one Jacob Armitage to deliver a trunk from Columbus to the office of Justice of the Peace William Henderson in Franklinton, just across the Scioto River. Henderson was to secretly marry an eloping couple, and Finney was to aid in the getaway. In fact, Armitage was a slave catcher contracted by Finney's former owner from whom he had escaped fifteen years earlier. There were no runaway lovers, and Henderson was ready with a rump court and a previously written ruling returning Finney to slavery upon affidavits provided by Armitage. The protesting Finney was handcuffed and locked in leg irons, swilled with whisky to quiet him, and trundled into a carriage for a gallop to Xenia and a train ride to Cincinnati. There he was spirited over the river and returned to his mistress in Frankfort.34

Jerry Finney was well known in Columbus; he was married, had a family, and had been a town fixture as a waiter and porter in various pleasure palaces for many years. Both the fact of his abduction and the manner in which it was carried out incensed many in the city, particularly the growing antislavery movement in which many younger Whigs, like Dennison, were prominent. Henderson and four confederates were charged under state law with kidnapping and brought to trial in September. Dennison secured a court
appointment as special assistant state attorney and joined the prosecution, actively arguing the case. Henderson was convicted and, though his associates were acquitted, it seemed a major victory for Dennison and the antislavery movement. On appeal, however, the state supreme court overturned the conviction, holding that Henderson was immune from prosecution for his legal conduct as a judge and that the only sanction to which he could be subjected was recall by the electorate. It also ruled that the trial court erred in allowing the trial to proceed when one juror was dismissed for illness, even though both counsels had agreed to continue one juror short. A defendant could not waive his rights under the Constitution.35

Happily, Finney was returned to his family a free man, having been purchased from his mistress with money raised by Columbus citizens.36 Dennison's prowess as a barrister was not demonstrated by the Finney case, and he seems to have avoided courtroom advocacy from then on, but his political commitment against slavery was publicly demonstrated. He was now positioned as an up-and-coming young man of substance, influence, and conviction, a winning combination for a life of politics.

"There Followed Sorrowful Days":

On May 27, 1849, Allen W. Turner died of Asiatic cholera in Columbus. He had arrived from Cincinnati a few days
earlier, and his death marked the beginning of another epidemic of that dreaded disease that so plagued nineteenth century America. Within a few days scores were ill, and soon most of those were dead.\textsuperscript{37}

Campaigns by municipal authorities to clean up streets and alleys began again, as they had during the previous epidemic of 1833. Most of the city was still served by private privies, often but a few feet from drinking wells, and this no doubt contributed more than any other cause to the spread of disease. Some sewers had been constructed in areas of most human concentration, such as the penitentiary, the lunatic asylum, and the block of High Street serving the Neil House and other hotels, but the lines led only to the nearest ditch, and from there sewage ran uncovered into the river. Stock pens, slaughterhouses, and tanneries lined the lower creeks of town, discharging their wastes directly into the flow. During dry spells, dams of filth and offal built up to fester in the creeks, and, in the words of one newspaper, "greatly incommmoded" residents.\textsuperscript{38}

The disease followed a swift and deadly course. Mild abdominal discomfort gave way to acute pain, fever, dehydration, vomiting, and diarrhea, and death came in a day or so. Those who could fled the city, hoping for sanctuary in the countryside. The sick were quarantined,
intensifying their misery, and the well cowered behind their walls. A great variety of pills, powders, potions, and other nostrums were advertised in the press and hawked about town. Sulphurous coal fires were kept burning in the streets to purify the air. Fresh fruits and vegetables were condemned. Many took only water fortified by stiff dollops of whiskey, perhaps to their advantage.\textsuperscript{39}

A contemporary, writing almost three-quarters of a century later, recalled the cholera epidemic of 1849 as her first memory of childhood, when her mother lifted her to the coffin to kiss the cold face of her baby sister. "There followed sorrowful days,"... she wrote; the sick and dying pitifully "cried for water, water, and it was always refused," according to the medical wisdom of the time. "My mother, in after years, said that no physician should ever again persuade her to refuse water to a sick child, as it was against her reason and common sense."\textsuperscript{40} Within two decades practitioners were prescribing hydration to treat cholera.

Anne Dennison suffered like that other grieving mother. Within a year, on September 10, 1850, their second son Tallmadge, age 7, was dead, followed in five days by little Mary, age 1. The cause of death for both is listed as dysentery, and was probably cholera. The Dennison children were now Neil, Elizabeth, born February 7, 1845, and
Erasmus, born December 10, 1846. Early death was never a stranger to nineteenth century Americans, even to the affluent, yet their grief was not lessened by the proximity. Dennison's sense of propriety and his reserve were now stiffened by gravity, and those who did not know him well called him aloof.

State Senator:

Dennison's predominant lifetime interest—politics—surfaced in the 1840's. A biographical sketch written early in the twentieth century mentions a maiden political speech in 1844, in which he opposed the annexation of Texas and the extension of slavery. While such a speech cannot be verified, the campaign that year, in which the Whigs reclaimed the governorship, was dominated by the issues of Texas and Oregon annexation, extension of slavery, and state control of banking. Dennison may well have taken to the hustings for his party that year. What can be documented is Dennison's political stumping for his old schoolmaster, William Bebb, in the campaign of 1846. Private banking, repeal of state Black Laws, and antipathy towards slavery dominated Whig rhetoric that year. This political activity coincided with Dennison's participation in the Jerry Finney prosecution, no doubt to his own advantage and that of the Whig cause.
1848 was the year Dennison took the plunge and ran for office, doubtlessly encouraged by Bebb, the Neils, and his other influential Columbus friends. He ran for state senator representing Franklin and Delaware Counties (a single seat at the time). The Whig party in Ohio was fraying about the edges. Bebb was retiring, and the Whigs nominated Seabury Ford for governor on a platform of private banking, an end to the war with Mexico, no forceful annexation of Mexican territory, and no slavery in any land acquired otherwise. The national party embarrassed liberal Whigs by nominating Zachary Taylor for president, a slave-holding southerner, thus alienating antislavery Whigs in the Western Reserve and elsewhere. Salmon P. Chase called a Free-Soil convention, accelerating the demise of the Whig party in Ohio and much of the North. Ford and the more conservative Ohio Whigs reacted with a campaign that virtually ignored the national candidate, and the result was that Taylor, though he won the presidency, lost Ohio, while Ford took the governor's chair. Dennison seems to have tried to keep the party together and ameliorate differences. He joined old warhorse Tom Corwin on the stump for both Taylor and Ford, speaking as far afield as Newark and Cleveland, cementing his reputation as a solid party man and somewhat of a moderate. On the second Tuesday in October, 1848, Dennison was elected state senator, and began a spirited two-year term.43
The personable lawyer, with his polished manners, good looks, and influential connections, was a force to be reckoned with from the beginning of the legislative term. A partisan fight broke out over the speakership of the senate, and Dennison figured prominently as a candidate. In the end he lost by five votes, but his standing in the legislature was enhanced. Both Whigs and Democrats were seriously divided over their national tickets and over slavery, and several Free-Soilers had won seats, often holding the swing vote. In this way Salmon P. Chase was elected to the U.S. Senate in a joint session of the legislature, even though he had alienated many Whigs by his defection. Dennison seems to have kept his feet well in the shifting swirl of alliances, and to have remained true to his principles. This was the legislature that repealed Ohio's Black Laws, in a complex, almost Byzantine, reversal of roles in which just enough Democrats joined Free Soilers and liberal Whigs to pull it off. Dennison was firmly on the side of repeal. At the end of his term, he denounced Henry Clay's U.S. Senate resolution that called for no interference with slavery in the Mexican session or the District of Columbia, and for a strengthened Fugitive Slave Law. He countered with his own resolution calling upon the federal government to exclude slavery from all present and future federal territories, for abolition of slavery in the
District of Columbia, and for repeal of the existing Fugitive Slave Law. He lost on a close vote, but, again, he had staked out his turf.44

Another side to Dennison's senate career was his open and successful sponsorship of measures designed to further the economic interests of his mentors and associates, as well as his own. In a major victory for his railroad interests, the legislature enacted a bill in February 1849 authorizing the Columbus and Xenia and the Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati Railroads to borrow more than the value of their outstanding capital stock, to sell new bonds at a discount, and to sell them out of state. This got both lines over financial hard times during construction and before operating revenues could be earned, assuring their success. In another measure in March 1850, Dennison sponsored a private bill benefiting William Neil, allowing him to substitute claims against the state for unpaid turnpike and canal toll charges.45

How is Dennison's senate career to be assessed? A perceptive mid-twentieth century scholar placed him "to the left of Tom Corwin, and to the right of Ben Wade and Josh Giddings," both prominent antislavery Ohioans of the time.46 That is about right. In 1850, when his senate term expired, Dennison was politically in the center or slightly center-right of Ohio liberals of his generation.
He was to the left of older, more conservative Whigs, like Corwin, but he was careful to avoid breaking with them. At a time when, in the retrospective of a 1920's dowager, "abolitionists were regarded by polite society much as Bolshevists are now," Dennison was by no means an abolitionist, and he was most sensitive to the judgments of polite society. He made a distinction between abolition of slavery in slave states, a matter he could leave to the electorate of those states, and the exclusion of slavery from new territories not yet admitted to the Union as states. As with many of his fated generation, the fundamental inconsistency of that position, and its tragic consequences, were matters to be faced with the steely mind of the truly committed. As for his efforts to benefit his friends and associates, Dennison no doubt saw them as legitimate and beneficial to the public good. He believed that railroads would benefit society and he did his best to aid in their creation. That he should profit in the process was not only proper, but honorable. To paraphrase a later day American of similar beliefs, what was good for the Columbus and Xenia was good for Ohio.

Having come to Columbus in the early 1840's as an ambitious young lawyer, Dennison entered the 1850's as a prominent Ohio politician and a leading citizen of the city. His star was rising.
ENDNOTES

CHAPTER II


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22 History of Franklin & Pickaway Counties, Ohio (Columbus: William Bros., 1880) 94.


28 Knepper, Ohio People, 159-62.

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41Greenlawn Cemetery Records, Columbus, Ohio.

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CHAPTER III

THE CAUSE

It was during the 1850s, in early middle life, that the members of William Dennison Jr.'s generation asserted themselves as shapers of the public dialogue. In a burst of creativity during the first six years of the decade, this generation poured forth its manifesto: Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*; Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*; Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Song of Hiawatha*; and Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*. The sectional schism over slavery and slavery in the territories loomed ever darker on the national horizon. Abraham Lincoln, Thaddeus Stevens, and Horace Greeley, along with Ohioans Salmon P. Chase, Joshua Giddings, and Benjamin Wade, increasingly hardened their positions, only to be met by matching intransigence from Southerners Henry A. Wise, Robert B. Rhett, and Jefferson Davis. Confident in their righteousness, congregations of determined men and women in their forties gathered in Charleston, Savannah, and Richmond to beseech God, not for forgiveness or reconciliation, but for the conversion of Black Northern Abolitionists from their evil
ways; while in Boston, Philadelphia, and Cleveland, equally righteous and self-righteous Northerners of the same generation beseeched the same God to scourge white Southerners of the sin of slave holding. Although Dennison's sense of probity and restraint prevented him from joining the more radical Ohio antislavery elements led by Wade and Giddings, he too was drawn inexorably down the dark path of intransigence and tragedy.

**Columbus in the 1850s:**

The city's Mexican War veterans came drifting home in batches throughout late 1849 and early 1850, colliding with companies of cocksure adventurers setting out for the California gold fields. Illuminating gas appeared in 1850, spurred by a municipal contract for street lighting. Regularly scheduled rail service to Xenia and Cincinnati began in 1850, to Cleveland in 1851, and to Zanesville in 1852. Soon the railroad station on High Street bustled with activity, the shrill whistles and foul-smelling black soot of the steam engines symbolizing progress, modernity, and civic pride to rich and poor alike.

Spiritualism and mysticism were popular in the early 1850s. "Rappers" gathered to seek out mysterious noises, inspired by the tapping sounds in a Hydeville, New York house that led terrorized tenants to a corpse buried in the cellar. Despite press characterizations as "montebanks and
knaves," itinerant spiritualists materialized in town "to delude the public and replenish their own pockets." Two spiritualist sisters named Fox flounced into Columbus in 1851, holding "sittings" three times a day in a private house at Third and Broad for one dollar a patron.

Bloomers appeared in Columbus in 1851. These loose-fitting trousers for women, fastened at the ankles, originated as a feminist rebellion against the constricting women's clothing of the day. Soon, however, a few women of sufficient daring and endowment adopted a form-fitting cut to their bloomers, and, perhaps inspired by souvenirs brought home by war veterans, added a Spanish-style toreador jacket and tasseled sombrero, creating quite a swirl at Broad and High Streets. By the end of the decade, the hoop skirt was in style, ostensibly designed to keep men at a distance. Clothing for men in the 1850s was no less inventive. Replacing the overcoat, the shawl came into fashion, often set off by a wide-brimmed hat and silk scarf. This foppish attire prompted one newspaper wag to combine social criticism with a provincial's jab at Easterners: "A few dozen bonnets and petticoats for young men's wear, to correspond with the shawls worn by them, are on their way to this city from the East." A spirit of innovation, optimism and, most of all, self-confidence, permeated all levels of society.
Leading Citizen:

William Dennison Jr. emerged from the 1840s and his term as state senator secure in his role as a major political and civic figure in central Ohio. In 1853 and 1854 he was city councilman from the First Ward. As with his service in the state senate, he declined to run for a second term. He became a frequent speaker at civic functions, often in association with more prominent orators, thus enhancing his public image and furthering Whig causes.6

During June 1852, Dennison spoke twice at Columbus rallies against the extradition of an Irish rebel named Thomas Francis Meagher, who had escaped to the United States from a British prison in Tasmania. Meagher went on to become a general in the Civil War, noted for leading New York's Irish Brigade. In February 1852, Dennison was prominent in the city's reception for the Hungarian revolutionary and exile Louis Kossuth, who was touring the United States raising money for his cause. Tweaking the tail of the British lion was a sure winner in nineteenth century American politics, and Americans in general supported the wave of republican uprisings that were sweeping Europe in the 1840s and 1850s. The Vatican's support of the status quo in Europe prompted some Americans to champion nativist and anti-Catholic sentiments that might otherwise have had smaller followings. Aid to foreign rebels appealed to
Germans, Irish, Italians, and many other ethnic groups in America. Some American Democrats toyed with the notion of active intervention abroad, either in support of popular uprisings or, as with filibustering expeditions to Cuba and Central America, to extend American territory and buttress slavery. But most Americans recognized the impracticability of such ventures and, while fascinated by foreign affairs, preferred domestic pursuits. The war with Mexico also served to vent some of the steam for foreign adventurism by high-lighting rifts over the issue within the American polity. The greater impact of such foreign diversions was upon American domestic politics and America's exulted opinion of itself, a fact that such a gifted orator as Kossuth knew well. His speeches in Columbus included: "Go on, go on, young Eagle of America! Thy place is not more upon the...low hills...growing in proud security...[but] ...above the mountains...that with...the powerful sweep of thy mighty wings thou mayest dispel the clouds of despotism." This was heady stuff to proud provincials, even if "dispelling the clouds of despotism" in Europe was to remain more rhetorical than real to most of them for the next several generations. Dennison adhered to the Whig line, friendly to foreign republican causes, but against intervention, or, more properly, above it. He was content to draw public support for himself and his party through association with firebrands like Kossuth.
On July 8, 1852, Dennison spoke at a more somber and politically significant occasion, when he presided at the Columbus memorial for Henry Clay, whose remains were passing through the city for interment in Kentucky. Clay had been the Great Compromiser, the champion of the Whig party and of the American West. Clay was the consummate American legislator of his time, and would most likely have been prime minister in a parliamentary system, but his repeated attempts to become president had been frustrated. His "American System" became the Whig credo: protective tariffs, private banking with government regulation, and public works financed by the sale of public lands. A border state slave-holder, Clay came to oppose slavery, favoring gradual emancipation and colonization of freed black people to Africa. Most of all, Clay strove to heal national schisms and to avoid civil war. The Missouri Compromise of 1820, the Tariff Compromise of 1833, and the Compromise of 1850, were his monuments. Born in 1777, Clay was a giant from a generation that understood the fragility of the American union, and he saw clearly the urgency for healing rifts that might threaten it. As he eulogized Clay that summer afternoon, Dennison was of a subsequent generation, one which subordinated compromise to principle. Perhaps, as he looked out over the crowd of mourners, Dennison remembered that he had denounced Clay's proposed compromise on
slavery in February 1850. With the passing of Henry Clay, the Whig party was moribund.8

Dennison continued his law practice during this period, though much of his time was taken up in other pursuits. He was in partnership with Aaron F. Perry and Henry B. Carrington, both stalwart Whigs active in Ohio politics. Much of their practice stemmed from Dennison's railroad connections, such as defending the Columbus and Xenia Railroad in lawsuits arising from encounters between the line's locomotives and farmer's livestock along the right of way. Nine years younger than Dennison, New England born, Yale educated, short, disorganized, romantic, pugnacious, astute, and eloquent, Carrington would play an important role in Dennison's governorship at the start of the Civil War. Carrington was appointed Ohio Adjutant General in 1857 by Governor Salmon P. Chase, and remained in that office when Dennison succeeded Chase in 1860.9 To Dennison and Carrington fell the task of managing Ohio's war effort in the opening months of the conflict.

Dennison's civic stature brought him invitations to serve various public and charitable institutions. He was a founding member of the Franklin County Agricultural Society and served on the boards of state charities such as the insane asylum and homes for abandoned and retarded young people. By the end of the decade, he was a vestryman of
Trinity Church in Columbus, the major Episcopalian parish of the city. His mother, Mary Carter Dennison, was from a prominent turn of the century Methodist family in Cincinnati, and his wife Anne's mother, Hannah Neil, was a leading Columbus Methodist and a noted philanthropist. It is likely that both William and Anne were raised in the Methodist Church, though that cannot be confirmed, but Trinity parish records list them as communicants in the 1850s, and they remained Episcopalians for the rest of their lives. Life brought happiness and sorrow to the Dennison household in the 1850s. Mary Catherine was born on October 20, 1851, son Herman arrived on March 7, 1853; Lucy followed in 1854, Jane was a Christmas baby on December 23, 1856; and Alen Neil arrived October 7, 1858. Mary Carter Dennison, aged 67, died in Cincinnati on January 21, 1852.10

Banker and Railroad Executive:

As the century unfolded, banking in Ohio mirrored that in much of the nation. Banking was one of the central issues in the political life of the day, with conservative Whigs championing private banking and Democrats, particularly the Locofooco faction, espousing several variants of government banking. At heart, this was more than a debate over the intricacies of finance. Many Locofoocos and other Democrats on the party left harbored deep hostility to the
concept of private banking, holding it to be an unfair burden foisted upon the people by lordly financiers who took more from society than they contributed. Most Whigs reacted with indignant alarm, pointing to the chronic need for business financing and currency creation, particularly in the West, while also raising the specter of European radicalism as an evil to be kept from soiling the New World. As the two parties alternated control of the state legislature, their conflicting views played out in debate and legislation. Banks, like other corporations early in the century, were incorporated by special bills of the state legislature, one at a time, granting individual charters to named individuals, the "incorporators." The charters specified conditions such as fees, location of offices and branches, amount of capitalization, degree of liability of the incorporators and stockholders, and other matters. As subsequent legislatures, often dominated by the opposing party, passed new taxes or regulations, the banks sued, claiming that their original charters were contracts and were violated by the new laws. The courts generally sided with the banks, judging a property right in the charters that could not be infringed by subsequent legislation.11

Many bank charters expired in the early 1840s, giving a Whig dominated legislature the opportunity to pass a new
comprehensive banking code in 1845. Something of a compromise with conservative Democrats, the new law provided for both a state bank and private charters, with control of currency creation, reserves, limited liability of stockholders, and a state bank board sitting in Columbus to regulate banking. In fact, the state bank was an umbrella under which private bankers could incorporate separate, privately-owned businesses called state bank branches, the provision that undoubtedly most appealed to Whigs and disturbed Democrats. These branches operated as banks under their own names, enjoyed protected districts in which to do business, and surrendered some privacy of operations to the state bank board in return for the most valuable privilege of issuing state banknotes. These were called "redbacks" after the ink with which they were printed, and their great value and attractiveness was that they could be redeemed at par in specie at all state bank branches, thus providing a stable and flexible currency. While assailed by every Democratic legislature for the next twenty years, this system served Ohio reasonably well until superseded by a roughly similar federal banking regime under the National Banking Act of 1864. It was this state banking system that eased Ohio through the Panic of 1857 with less financial trauma than might have been otherwise; the new system also held state finances together in the traumatic early years of the Civil War.12
The Columbus Exchange Bank was organized as a state bank branch in May, 1845 under the new banking law. Its driving force was its first president, William B. Hubbard, who served until 1852. Other prominent Ohioans involved in the bank were the Neils, P. W. Huntington, and D. W. Deshler, all members of famous Ohio financial dynasties. Also involved was a young lawyer named William Dennison Jr., who had attained sufficient prominence by June, 1852 to succeed the retiring Hubbard and become the bank's second president.13

Dennison's tenure as president of the Columbus Exchange Bank came at a time of continued difficulties for banking in Ohio. While the "redback" provided a stable currency, it was not the only currency. A host of private banks in Ohio and in other states also issued paper money, often suspect, and often trading at a discount to specie, depending on the redeeming banker's judgement of the issuer's soundness or, perhaps, based simply on the distance from the issuer. Fictitious out-of-town banknotes appeared from time to time, as well as outright forgeries. But competent tellers and conservative management could usually deal with these inconveniences. The political assault upon banking was a different matter. More radical elements of the Democratic Party dominated both the Ohio Constitutional Convention of 1850-51 and the subsequent state legislature, and
vigorously pursued their anti-banking agenda that included opposition to other state-created private privileges, such as canal, railroad, and turnpike companies. Part of their credo was that no act should be exempt from amendment by a subsequent legislature, thus setting up a confrontation with the courts over the law of contract and property. One state law in 1853 directed sheriffs to break into bank vaults and seize money to satisfy taxes when bankers refused to pay. Eventually, the state and federal courts sided with the bankers, and ideological vendettas against banking faded towards the end of the decade as the slavery controversy riveted the nation's attention. Dennison weathered these vicissitudes during his presidency and "retired" on January 1, 1856, passing on management of the bank to D. W. Deshler just in time to avoid the business recession of 1857.14

Bank management and the practice of law were not Dennison's only private ventures during this period. From 1854 to 1859 he was also president of the Columbus and Xenia Railroad. The redoubtable Kelley had finished building the line in 1850, and with its connections via the Little Miami Railroad to Cincinnati and the Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati to Cleveland, it was a money-maker from the start. In 1854 the Columbus and Xenia and other booming railroads drove the Ohio Stage Company out of the
long-haul business, and the clever Neils sold their equipment west to Iowa, where the iron horse had yet to appear. Dennison could hardly have been a hands-on railroad manager who concerned himself with efficiency, revenues, schedules, and service, since the Columbus and Xenia had formed an operating partnership with the Little Miami in 1853 by which the Little Miami ran both lines as a unit. Dennison no doubt busied himself with financial matters, but it is clear that he developed a competent grasp of railroad operations as well. What he learned during this period gave him the knowledge and confidence to be firm and uncompromising towards railroad managements during his later service as war governor and Postmaster General.

From 1853 to 1856, Dennison served as vice president of the Columbus, Piqua, and Indiana Railroad, in which he also had a financial interest. That ill-fated line began service due west from Columbus in 1853, and, after much financial tribulation, connected with others to Chicago, thus garnering a share of the lucrative east-west traffic across the West. This was a troubled venture from the start, as management squabbled with connecting Indiana lines over track gauges, suffered cost overruns, and eventually surrendered to receivership in 1856; but not before Dennison and William Neil had obtained $600,000 worth of 7% Columbus,
Piqua and Indiana bonds, guaranteed jointly and severally by the Columbus, Piqua, and Indian Railroad, the profitable Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati, and two other lines in which they also had interests, for $305,000! This "amazing contract," as one researcher put it, was a financial gamble for Dennison, but it eventually paid off handsomely as the line was reincarnated and in time merged with other railroads. Another Dennison venture during this period was the Columbus and Hocking Valley Railroad of which he was an incorporator in 1853, but which failed later in the decade after a dust-up between Columbus and Lancaster investors.16

It is tempting to assess Dennison's behavior during the 1840s and 1850s as that of a dilettante. To his carefully cultivated social position he added a single term as state senator and city councilman, a part-time law practice, a short stint as a bank president, and a short term as president of a railroad that was, in effect, a holding company. One might conclude that, in late 20th century parlance, Dennison was "getting his ticket punched," or "beefing up his résumé," in furtherance of his political ambitions. There seems to be some validity to such an assessment. Yet his reluctance to run for second terms in the senate and city council also reflected sound political judgment, since Democrats were in the ascendancy in the
early part of the decade, while the Whigs were in disarray; and his term as president of the Columbus and Xenia ended only when he resigned to run for governor in 1859. The picture also emerges of a competent man of his times. Dennison was clearly shrewd and perceptive in his associations, judging astutely when to pursue one objective and when to move on to another. He was cautious, and not impulsive. Above all, Dennison was a politician, and the 1850s were a time of great political excitement.

Republican:

On June 13, 1854, Henry B. Carrington was a Franklin County delegate to a convention in Columbus of various Ohio political factions attempting to unite in opposition to the extension of slavery in the territories. These groups included antislavery Whigs like Carrington, whose party was breaking up, a few antislavery Democrats upset with the position of their party leaders, and remnants of the Free Soil and Liberty Parties in Ohio. Also present were outright abolitionists, Germans of the Turner Society who concluded that their antislavery views transcended their European class-consciousness, and Nativists, or North Americans as they preferred to call themselves, who were opposed to the presence of black slavery in America for racist reasons. Maneuvering within this diverse group of strange bedfellows, Carrington was in his element. Flushed
with excitement and the June heat, he won a seat on the resolutions committee where his eyes flashed as he held out for "the soil of Nebraska and Kansas...for free homes, for free men!" Dennison (who, with characteristic caution, was not a delegate but a keen observer) joined Carrington at the American Hotel on the corner of High and State Streets during the noon recess with a copy of a Detroit newspaper reporting that a similar group in Michigan had just adopted the name "Republican," in lieu of "Fusion," for their movement. According to his own account, Carrington proposed the term to the convention that afternoon, and that is how the Republican Party of Ohio was named. Dennison does not figure in contemporary accounts of this first Republican gathering in Ohio, although several other prominent Ohioans do, like Salmon P. Chase, Benjamin Wade, Joshua Giddings, and Noah H. Swayne, as well as lesser luminaries like Carrington. Dennison seems to have left radicalism to his younger partner until he could better gauge the political winds.

Judging those winds to be full and fair by February 1856, Dennison traveled to Pittsburgh as an Ohio delegate to the first national Republican convention, held on the 22nd in Lafayette Hall. The Republicans had charged forth from their first state convention to sweep the 1855 Ohio elections, and delivered a stunning reversal to the
Democrats. Slavery in the territories was the overriding issue, the only issue that held such a polyglot bunch together, and Salmon P. Chase emerged as their standard bearer. Over six feet tall with a towering intellect, haughty, self-righteous and politically duplicitous, Chase piously championed the antislavery cause. His sincere commitment to that cause cannot be questioned, but he was increasingly unable to distinguish between its advancement and his own overwhelming ambition. Those who ran afoul of his arrogance called him "a political vampire," and a "moral bull-bitch." Chase had been elected Governor of Ohio in 1855 and had just entered triumphantly upon the first of two consecutive biennial terms in January of 1856. It was mostly his inability to form a broad personal following that cost him the presidency for which he lusted, but he nevertheless played a major role in national life for the next two decades. Chase did not attend the Pittsburgh convention, though his position in the party assured him strong influence at least upon the Ohio delegation. Dennison accompanied Joshua Giddings, federal congressman and de facto chairman of the delegation, and over forty other Ohio Republicans, to join a hall full of ambitious men from other states and to cast about with them in the wider pond of national politics.
At the convention, Dennison set out to be known. He served on the Committee on Resolutions and Permanent Organization with Giddings, who became its chairman. There was little doubt about the platform to be proposed: no slavery in federal territories; support for the anti-slavery element struggling to form a government in Kansas; and a stinging rebuke to the Democrats and the Franklin Pierce administration. The shortness, clarity, and bluntness of the platform contrasted sharply with the opulent polemic so customary in 19th century politics: "Believing...the present...Administration...to be weak and faithless...it is [the] purpose of our organization to overthrow it."\(^2_1\) Dennison used his committee assignment to launch a bid for the Ohio seat on the newly formed National Republican Committee, and though he lost, he greatly enhanced his position by winning a consolation seat on the Ohio state committee where he continued to work diligently for the Republican cause. Perhaps the greatest value of the convention to Dennison's political ambitions was his opportunity to meet national figures. Horace Greeley, Charles Francis Adams, Charles Sumner, David Wilmot, Thaddeus Stevens, Francis P. Blair, Hannibal Hamlin, Simon Cameron, William H. Seward, and Abraham Lincoln were all present. With a display of polished manners and sincerity, Dennison burnished his reputation as an up-and-coming party stalwart.\(^2_2\)
Dennison found a congenial power base on the state central committee, where his talents as a suave, behind-the-scenes deal maker could have full play, and where he was to serve off and on for the next two decades. Within a year, Dennison was chairman. He worked to organize the party and was often a conciliator between its radical and conservative elements, sometimes called the Cleveland and Cincinnati wings. He was a delegate-at-large to the Republican national presidential nominating convention in Philadelphia in June, 1856 where he supported John C. Frémont to run against Democrat James Buchanan. As in his business and civic life, Dennison had risen to a position of prominence in Ohio politics. He was poised for another move.

The Chase administration and Ohio Republicans ran into hard times in 1857. A major economic downturn gripped the nation and ended a long period of relative prosperity dating from 1843. The failure of the Ohio Insurance Company in New York financial markets brought the panic home to Ohioans, and economic disruption, bank closures, and railroad failures soon followed. The Democrats took the offensive and passed a bill in 1858 mandating that public funds be withdrawn from state banks and kept in the vaults of state and county treasurers. The governor did not have a veto in Ohio at that time, so Chase was not able to block
the legislation. In an appeal to old fashioned Jeffersonian agrarianism, Democrats called again for an end to private banking and paper money, and for a return to specie currency. The Cleveland Plain Dealer, a Democratic organ, railed against "Rag Barons, Charter Mongers, and Privileged Orders," while the state Democratic Central Committee called for "all wages [to be] paid in gold and silver, ...and [that] the farmer may ride home,...having sold his...corn, with a bag of specie on the pommel of his saddle."24

Events took an ominous turn for the Republicans in early June 1857, when a major financial scandal was discovered right under Chase's nose. John G. Breslin had been state treasurer in the previous Democratic administration, and was succeeded by his brother-in-law, William H. Gibson. Upon leaving office, Breslin confessed to Gibson that he could not account for over half a million dollars of state money, and somehow secured from him a promise to cover up the theft while in office. In June 1857, Gibson was unable to meet the interest on the state debt and the secret was out. Chase acted promptly to secure Gibson's resignation, take the keys to the treasurer's safe, and appoint William Dennison Jr. to chair a committee to investigate what was now building in the press as a major scandal, the "Breslin Defalcation."25
Chase had considered not running for a second term as governor to concentrate on preparations for the 1860 presidential race. The economic downturn had soured many voters on the Republicans, and he dared not risk a defeat in the polls. The Breslin Defalcation settled the matter; he must clear it up and win re-election to vindicate his reputation and restore his chances for the presidential nomination. Dennison, the suave and urbane party chairman, attorney, and businessman, with a spotless reputation of his own, was the logical choice, especially since he was not part of the Chase administration.\textsuperscript{26}

Chase acted over the weekend of June 13th and 14th, and the story broke in the Monday newspapers. Dennison was already at work with his committee auditing the treasurer's accounts and counting the money in the safe, but both he and Chase knew that the most important work lay in restoring public confidence in the Chase administration and fending off the political opposition. Democratic newspapers such as the Newark \textit{Advocate}, and politicians like S. S. "Sunset" Cox were railing against Chase and the Republicans for not uncovering the embezzlement sooner, and mass indignation meetings were being held throughout the state. Dennison took to the stump early to defend his party, staking his personal prestige on the outcome. In a speech in Columbus on the evening of the 18th he stood solemnly
before the crowd and, in the words of a partisan Republican newspaperman: "pledged his honor as a man and a citizen that...he would satisfy the curiosity of the people, without fear, favor or affection."27

On June 23, Dennison abruptly resigned his appointment. In his letter of resignation he claimed that the board of directors of the Columbus and Xenia Railroad refused to accept his resignation as president of the line, and that he therefore did not have time to investigate the embezzlement. A Republican newspaper account of the resignation the next day explained that pressing matters in Dennison's legal practice demanded his presence out of town. Neither reason appears convincing. The investigation dragged on for over two years, and newspaper accounts in 1859 give a clue to the more likely reason for Dennison's resignation. Breslin eventually implicated bankers D. W. Deshler and William Sullivant, among others, in a Byzantine series of banking and real estate skulduggeries with the missing money. These two were never indicted, but they were close associates of Dennison, and it is reasonable to assume that, as he dug into the record in June 1857, he determined that his own interests would be better served by distancing himself from the matter. There is no evidence that Dennison was a party to the embezzlement, or that he knowingly participated in any of the suspect transactions, though he
would not escape unsubstantiated allegations of complicity by association during his 1859 campaign for governor. It probably appeared to him in 1857, however, that he could not escape the suspicion of impropriety if he did not investigate his associates, and he likely feared what he might find. Dennison, Chase, and the Republicans were able to tough out the incident, though just barely. Breslin inadvertently defused the political issue and aided the Republican cause by fleeing to Canada. This apparent admission of guilt allowed the Republicans to blame the Democrats and the previous administration as the culprits and paint poor Gibson as a hapless dupe. And the embezzlement was not the only issue in the 1857 campaign. Economic issues have been touched on above, and these favored the Democrats. More important, the Dred Scott Decision was handed down in March of 1857, enraging antislavery forces, even dismaying some Democrats, and once again made slavery the overwhelming issue in Ohio as it was elsewhere in the North. Chase and the Republicans went on to win a squeaker in the fall, Dennison was re-elected chairman of the Republican state central committee, and life went on.  

Dennison had once again demonstrated his political sensitivity and had sidled away from a potentially embarrassing situation. By leaving Chase to wrestle with
the embezzlement without him, Dennison had also declared his independence from the haughty governor, perhaps for political reasons, perhaps for personal ones, something Chase would never forget. But Dennison now had his own political power base and he had his own ambitions as well.

Candidate:

In 1859, Dennison judged his time had come. Chase was leaving the governorship after two successful terms, having positioned himself as a leading candidate for his party's presidential nomination in 1860, and having established the legitimacy of the Republican party in Ohio. From his seat on the Republican state central committee, Dennison sensed that the time was ripe to offer himself as Chase's successor. Other likely candidates were Thomas Corwin of Lebanon, leader of the southern conservative wing of the party, former Whig governor, U.S. Senator, Secretary of the Treasury, and recent convert to the Republican cause; and either of two Northern Ohio lawyers, both firebrand leaders of the radical wing of the party, U.S. Congressman Joshua Giddings, and U.S. Senator Benjamin Wade. Dennison's deliberate efforts over the previous several years had positioned him as the logical compromise candidate, less radical than Giddings or Wade, less conservative than Corwin, and acceptable to both factions. By spring he had corresponded openly with Republican acquaintances
throughout the state, soliciting support for his forthcoming bid at the state convention in June. Chase, with his sights set on bigger game, was losing interest in state politics, but could be counted on to campaign for the ticket out of self interest if nothing else. The state nominating convention met in Armory Hall, Columbus, on June 2, 1859, and Dennison soon found that his careful preparations had borne fruit. He faced only token opposition for the nomination, handily defeating David K. Carter of Stark County, 299 votes to 65.\textsuperscript{29}

Dennison's Democratic opponent was Rufus Percival Ranney of Cleveland. Ranney was a self-made man, rising from humble farming roots in Portage County to become a lawyer, state legislator, state supreme court judge, and U.S. district attorney for Ohio. In his early years as a lawyer, he was in partnership with Ben Wade for a short time, though he went on to differ with him politically. Ranney was about as well known throughout the state as Dennison, that is to say, not much outside of his home district. He was a competent jurist, well respected by those who knew him, and judged by one historian to be "one of his party's strongest and ablest men.\textsuperscript{30}

As a Western Reserve Democrat, he was a party moderate, and his nomination therefore reflected a sense in his party that the Ohio electorate in 1859 was shifting inexorably toward the
Republican position. He supported Stephen A. Douglas' popular sovereignty solution to slavery in the territories, defended the Fugitive Slave Law and the Dred Scott Decision on essentially legalistic grounds, and lambasted the Republicans for their banking and treasury policies.31

The campaign was a series of debates between the candidates, a format that had fired the public interest since the Lincoln/Douglas debates in Illinois the previous year. Dennison and Ranney appeared together before crowds throughout the state, delivering two-to four-hour speeches, and flinging barbed but polite questions at one another. There were two issues. Ranney hammered his strongest point, Republican banking policy, administration of state funds, and the Breslin Defalcation, which Dennison generally blunted. Dennison, in turn, had the strongest issue, slavery and all its attendant ramifications. Both made gaffes, both recovered from then, both were competent, and there was no great debating point like the Freeport Question with which one impaled the other. The campaign, though intensely earnest, was marked by civility and good grace between the contenders, and neither employed personal invective against the other.

The candidates did not stump alone. The Democrats imported the redoubtable Stephen A. Douglas, U.S. Senator from Illinois and likely Democratic standardbearer in 1860,
to sweep the state and stir the souls of the Democracy. The Republican state committee countered with Abraham Lincoln. It is likely that conservatives on the committee and in the Cincinnati wing of the party brought in Lincoln as a counterweight to the more radical stands of Wade, Giddings, and the Cleveland wing. Chase could not have been pleased to have a potential rival on his home turf. But Lincoln was immensely popular by late 1859, and had achieved what would later be called "star quality," so his presence was to be appreciated for its contribution to party victory. Dennison's name does not appear in records of the invitation, and Lincoln seems not to have mentioned him in his Ohio speeches. But Dennison remained chairman of the state committee during this time and must have had a hand in the affair. He clearly benefited from Lincoln's visit. From their respective itineraries, it is not clear that the two ever appeared together during the campaign, but Lincoln's support was not forgotten by Dennison, and he found many opportunities in the future to show his gratitude. Lincoln and Douglas did not appear together either, as they stumped separately throughout Ohio, generally repeating the positions they had advocated in Illinois.32

The campaign was well covered in the press. Partisan editorials abounded, as they always had in American politics, but by the late 1850s the telegraph and the railroad
had greatly increased the speed and availability of news, which in turn increased the demand for it among eager readers nationwide. Editors responded to competitive pressures with long front page articles containing verbatim transcripts of the debates. The result was many more voters than ever before having access to the full text of the candidates' remarks, rather than only partisan summaries as in previous campaigns, and the best informed electorate the state had yet known.

Ranney's best issue was banking and finance. He chided Dennison for wanting to deposit public money in private banks rather than keeping it safe in the state treasury. Dennison's admonition that the best interests of the citizens were served by allowing public money to remain in circulation as bank demand deposits was countered with sharp references to the Breslin Defalcation and the evils of letting public funds fall into the hands of "bankers and brokers and all that tribe of sharks...." Ranney reminded voters that Dennison was associated in business with Sullivant, Deshler, and the others implicated in the scandal, but was unable or unwilling to present any specific evidence of personal involvement on Dennison's part. Dennison countered in two ways. First he argued that the Breslin embezzlement took place during a Democratic administration, that Breslin himself was a Democrat, and
that therefore the primary responsibility for failing to uncover it should fall upon the Democrats. He praised Chase and the Republicans for dealing promptly with the matter when it was uncovered. Second, he took the high road on the sub-treasury issue, arguing that banks provided needed services of credit and currency formation, and that bank deposits of public funds were the lubricant for economic growth. But Ohioans were becoming jaded by these old arguments. Slavery was the overriding issue of the times and in this Dennison had the stronger position.

Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law was a local and highly emotional matter in Ohio in 1859, as it was also a national issue. All through the 1850s, cases of blacks dragged by force across the Ohio River into slavery had excited the public consciousness. In one celebrated case, the minor children of a free black family named Polly in Lawrence County were kidnapped outright by slave catchers and sold as slaves in Kentucky. The irate Ohio legislature voted public money for their release through litigation in the Kentucky courts, and some of the children were returned home, while others were still being sought in Virginia where they had been re-sold. Slaves traveling through Ohio with their masters escaped, or were forcibly taken by abolitionists. Ohio courts often ruled that such persons were free, which greatly angered Southern interests as well
as some Ohio Democrats. Early in the first Chase administration, a family of escaped slaves named Gardner was fleeing a posse in southern Ohio. As the pursuers closed in, the despairing mother stabbed her ten-year old daughter to death with a butcher knife rather than return the child to slavery. The most current example in 1859 was the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue. In September 1858, John Prince was an escaped slave living in Oberlin. His master's agents enlisted the United States marshal to arrest him, but a Oberlin mob intercepted them at nearby Wellington and released Prince by force. Thirty-seven persons were subsequently indicted by a federal grand jury for violating the Fugitive Slave Law. Anti-slavery advocates petitioned on behalf of the first two convicted, and secured a review of the constitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Law before the Ohio Supreme Court. The sentiment of the United States Supreme Court had been clearly established by the Dred Scott Decision, so appeal to that body appeared futile. Their argument, however, amounted to a request for nullification of the federal law in Ohio, a point not lost upon the court or the aroused citizenry on both sides of the issue. In May 1859, Ohio Chief Justice Joseph R. Swan ruled that "if a weary, frightened slave should appeal to me to protect him from his pursuers,...I might momentarily forget my allegiance to the law and Constitution, and give him a
covert," but, nonetheless upheld the supremacy of the Constitution and the federal law, and denied the appeal. Some thoughtful Ohioans welcomed the decision as wise and as averting a confrontation between the state and federal governments, but popular sentiment was strongly against Swan. He lost the Republican re-nomination for Chief Justice in the May state convention, and neither Dennison nor any other party leader risked his popularity by defending him. Slavery, the Fugitive Slave Law, and the extension of slavery into federal territories all combined into the one issue that most aroused the electorate in 1859.

"I will oppose the recapture of a slave with a bayonet, so help me God!" Dennison must have regretted this uncharacteristically emotional outburst as soon as he said it in Hamilton early in the race. His opponent was quick to seize his opening, and scoured him for planning to block the enforcement of federal law by armed might if elected. Chase was forced to distance himself, arguing in statesman-like fashion for compliance with the law of the land and the decisions of the courts, while using the ballot box to redress proslavery domination of the federal government. Dennison fell back on a time-honored tactic of politicians before and since; he denied that he had said such a thing. In response to Ranney's repeated jabs, Dennison affirmed in
stops throughout the state that he would uphold federal law as governor, and that he would specifically uphold the Fugitive Slave Law "until repealed."39 A counterthrust presented itself when partisans revealed that Ranney himself had advocated prohibiting slavery in the federal territories at one time. Ranney's protestation that he had been only an unsophisticated youth at the time backfired when it was gleefully revealed that he was quoted in the Mahoning Register in 1850 saying the same thing, when he was 34 years old! Slavery was Dennison's grail and Ranney's bane. Dennison proclaimed slavery "a moral, political and social wrong," but also that it should not be interfered with in a state where it existed. He appealed to many working-class Democrats by arguing that the growth and prosperity of the old Northwest Territories, when compared to that of the Southern states between the Appalachians and the Mississippi, clearly proved that a free-labor economy was more productive than a slave economy, particularly since the climate and fertility of the soil were either the same or favored the South. Ranney scored in some quarters by upholding the Democratic policy of denying the franchise to most black Ohioans. Dennison was forced to waffle on the issue, knowing full well that, while most Ohioans seemed to be coming over to an antislavery position, that was by no means the same as an equal rights position for free black
people. Ranney defended popular sovereignty in the territories, and Dennison ridiculed it. Dennison had the political high ground in the state, and Ranney was valiantly on the defensive.40

The Republicans were triumphant, their sweep a harbinger of the national campaign to come the next year. Dennison won handily, surpassing Chase's totals of two years before, and carrying a majority of both houses of the legislature with him. Dennison's performance was a pleasant surprise to many in his party who had feared that he was too "frittered in polish" to be a good campaigner and too much of an aristocrat to appeal to proud Ohioans. The Republican press went out of its way to praise his skill as an orator and debater, as if in relief. An elated Dennison addressed a party rally in Cincinnati on the 26th of October. He grandly pronounced his election to be a repudiation of the Democrats, of the Buchanan administration in Washington, of the Lecompton Constitution in Kansas, of popular sovereignty, and of slavery as an institution.41

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales was all the rage in the 1850s, having first appeared early in the decade. In its lead story the sons of New England were called upon to look to their "Gray Champion" who would rise again as a ghost "should domestic tyranny again oppress us" and lead
them to "vindicate their ancestry." This was the spirit of steely absolutism and romantic idealism that was gripping the souls of Americans. Dennison shared this fiery conviction, and had fanned it to victory in his campaign. He was at the height of his powers, keen, insightful, eloquent, and utterly convinced of the righteousness of his stand. He was about to face the consequences of that conviction.
ENDNOTES

CHAPTER III


4Hooper, History of Columbus, ibid; Lee, History of Columbus, Vol. I, 636.

5Hooper, History of Columbus, ibid; Lee, History of Columbus, Vol. II, 734-5.

6Martin, History of Franklin County, 444-446; Lee, History of Columbus, Vol. II, 61, 503.


10Parish Records, Trinity Church, Columbus, Ohio; Greenlawn Cemetery Records, Columbus, Ohio; Spring Grove Cemetery Records, Cincinnati, Ohio; Martin, History of Franklin County, 380; Lee, History of Columbus, Vol. I, 913.

11Martin, History of Franklin County, 321; Roseboom, Civil War Era, 124-142, Francis P. Weisenburger, The Passing of the Frontier: 1825-1850 (Columbus: The Ohio Historical Society), 1941, Chap. XV.


13Martin, History of Franklin County, 320-321; Hooper, History of Columbus, 248-249.


30 Roseboom, Civil War Era, 348.


33*Daily Ohio State Journal*, Sept. 8, 21, and Oct. 6, 1859; *Cleveland Morning Leader*, 16 Sept. 1859.

34*The Ohio Statesman*, Sept. 9, 1859.


36Roseboom, *Civil War Era*, 347.


38*Dayton Daily Empire*, Sept. 15, 1859; *The Ohio Statesman*, Sept. 6, 1859.

39*Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Sept. 12, 1859.

40Blue, *Chase*, 106; *Daily Dayton Journal*, Sept. 9, 1859; *Dayton Daily Empire*, Sept 9, 15, and 23, Oct, 1, 1859; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Sept. 15, 1859; *Cleveland Morning Leader* Sept. 16, Oct 1, 1859; *Ohio State Journal*, Sept. 8, 21, and 24, Oct 5 and 6, 1859; *The Ohio Statesman*, Sept. 7, 8, 9, and 10, 1859.

42 Nathaniel Hawthorne, Twice-Told Tales (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1851), 11.
CHAPTER IV
THE GATHERING DARKNESS

In the cold pre-dawn of October 16 1859, twenty-two armed men crept from their hideout on a rented farm in Maryland, just across the Potomac River from Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. Their leader left behind a strange pronouncement, "Vindication of the Invasion," penned in the past tense, as if their desperate scheme had already failed and their martyrdom had been achieved. John Brown and his followers fell upon the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, overpowered the night watchman, and raised the banner of rebellion, calling upon slaves to "swarm like bees" and scourge the South of its mortal sin. But the bees did not swarm. Instead, Colonel Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart arrived that night with a company of U. S. Marines and stormed the fire-house where Brown and his band were besieged by local townsfolk. Brown gained his martyrdom, and his actions rang throughout the South like the harsh clang of a tocsin. Black Northern Abolitionists had crossed the line from advocating abolition to inciting servile insurrection. Many white Southerners went armed, and feared lest they be murdered in their beds. In the
North, reaction oscillated between praise for Brown's motives and horror at his deeds. A Cleveland newspaper summed up the feeling of many: "Slavery drives John Brown to madness, and then hangs him for that insanity."¹ John Brown's ghost would haunt the elections of 1860, wildeyed and menacing over Southern ballot boxes, fierce and vindictive above the Northern polls.

That night, as the Marines were rushing the Harper's Ferry firehouse with bayonets and truncheons, a large crowd of well-wishers gathered in Columbus before Governor-elect William Dennison Jr.'s home on High Street. A band from a local military club "filled the air with triumphant music," and the joyful partisans waved banners and placards as they kindled a bonfire in the street to salute their champion. Dennison responded from his threshold with a happy little speech while his wife Anne improvised refreshment. Satisfied, the revelers surged off to outgoing Governor Salmon P. Chase's home to repeat their performance.² After a successful campaign in which he had ridden the whirlwind of antislavery sentiment, Dennison was governor of Ohio. He was pleased with himself, and Anne was delighted.

"The Grace and Beauty of the West":

An editorial in the New York Times by its Ohio correspondent summed up the expectations of Ohio Republicans for the governorship of William Dennison Jr. He was described
as "the opposite of a rough man, ... a courteous, and educated gentleman ... [who] mingled much in society ... [and who would] administer government with dignity, intelligence, and success." The Times' readers were invited to come to Columbus in January to witness the inauguration, "a grand gathering, [a] mingling of the grace and beauty of the West." To the successor in office of Salmon P. Chase, this was hardly an auspicious beginning. Chase was "Mr. Republican" in Ohio, (in the nation, if judged by his own reckoning) and, though he was educated, intelligent, successful, and sometimes courteous, the "moral bull-bitch" was hardly "the opposite of a rough man." Chase was admired and respected (even while little loved) as a strong man, while Dennison was known mostly for his urbanity and polish. Dennison's public image was in danger of becoming that of an effete fop, a caretaker governor gracing the office until Republicans could agree on someone more manly and forceful. While not what Dennison expected or intended, his inaugural address added to this impression.

Dennison's speech on January 9, 1860, was substantial and well reasoned. In all probability he wrote it himself, without the aid of the nineteenth century equivalent of a "spin doctor." Dennison labored long on his speech, it expressed his views and his values, and he was proud of it. He opened by devoting an extensive preamble to
reviewing the state's economy, as was customary in inaugu­ral addresses. Calling it a "drain upon the treasury," he asked for the sale or abandonment of state interests in the Ohio canal system. He proposed a state-funded geological survey to inventory Ohio's natural resources, the first governor to do so. He urged state funding for roads and railroads, and called upon the federal government to fund Western internal improvements in proportion to the region's rising population, pointing out the inequalities of federal funding for public harbors, ports, and fortifications in the East.4

Yet slavery in the Southern states and in the territor­ies remained the overriding issue of the day. John Brown and several of his followers had been hanged the month before, bequeathing fierce passions and sober second thoughts to struggle in the souls of Americans. Dennison carefully and forcefully restated his beliefs, confident that he spoke for the center of the new Republican Party. He denounced slavery as a "pernicious wrong" that should not be extended to any federal territory not a state of the Union. He denounced the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision, arguing that the Constitution did not provide a property right of one person over another, and that such matters could only be decided by state courts. Dennison claimed that the Constitution granted the states only three
rights regarding slavery. The first was that the foreign slave trade could not be abolished before 1808, the second, that a state could not create a law denying legal remedy to a person seeking recapture of an escapee from labor or service in another state, and the third, that three-fifths of slaves should be counted to determine the federal representation of states. The teachings of William Bebb and Robert Bishop were heard again through their student as Dennison affirmed that the framers of the Constitution intended no other concessions to the slaveholding states and that these were made "because they had a Union of the States to create, and to their ardent and generous minds the voluntary removal of slavery by the action of the States themselves, without Federal interference, seemed not only certain, but close at hand." He further asserted that the Constitution prohibited the people of a territory from establishing slavery within that territory since it would violate "inalienable personal rights." Furthermore, the Congress could not allow nor establish slavery within territories for the same reason.\(^5\)

Dennison then critiqued recent history. He again branded the war with Mexico a conflict to extend slavery to the Rio Grande. He decried the movement by Southerners to expand slavery into the territories as an attempt to increase the political representation of slave states in the federal
government, to maintain southern dominance of the Electoral
College, and thereby of the presidency. He warned of
conspiracies within the South. Rumors abounded, he re­
ported, of a plot by the deep South to secede behind a
screen of border slave states which would remain in the
Union "for a while" to shield the breakaway states from a
Northern invasion. This league of conspirators also planned
to extend their domination into Mexico, the Caribbean, and
Central America, taking slavery with them and restoring the
importation of slaves from Africa. Southern stalwarts were
warning that the election of a Republican president in 1860
would bring certain secession, while continued domination
of the presidency by the South might maintain the Union,
but only "for a while." Dennison denounced these schemes,
proclaiming that the South could not hold out against the
power of the North's economy and population, but he stopped
short of calling for federal interference with slavery
within the slave states.6 The notion of state sovereignty
was a strong conviction among nineteenth century Americans,
and not even redress of a "pernicious wrong" could yet
convince most of them that either the federal government or
other states could interfere in a state's internal affairs.

Dennison went on to clearly express himself on the
position of black people within American society in a way
that would seem starkly racist to most late twentieth
century Americans. He sympathized with the many working class white people in the North who feared that hordes of emancipated blacks would undercut their wages and, as if oblivious to the presence of thousands of free black Ohioans, he questioned whether slaves could be happy as free persons in a white society. His solution was colonization. Blacks should be removed to a new land somewhere on the isthmus of Central America which would be acquired for them in some unspecified manner by the United States. There they would establish a free state associated with the United States and there, with American financial and technical supervision, they would construct a canal linking the Atlantic with the Pacific. This would result in a nation of free blacks "in a climate suitable to them," under the tutelage, and to the benefit, of the United States. These views were widely shared at the time by Northerners who considered themselves both enlightened and progressive. Slavery was an absolute evil that demeaned whites as it denied freedom to blacks. It was a sin of white people, to which blacks were almost incidental. Free blacks, on the other hand, were a burden on white society to be borne out of honor and obligation. Blacks were humble beings entitled to freedom and Christian charity, but who would be forever disadvantaged in the competitive world of free whites. It seems never to have crossed Dennison's mind
that most blacks might not wish to be deported, or even that they should be consulted on the matter.

For all his hard work and careful reasoning, Dennison's inaugural address was not the stirring success he expected. His vision was clear, and his convictions were firm, but he was unable to rise above pomposity. The speech droned on for hours as Dennison read his studied prose, and the minds of his listeners numbed as their backsides ached. Among many examples of tortured syntax was: "If attended with success at the threshold in dissolving the great confederacy and creating a small one, the introduction of standing armies to confront border war on the slave and free frontiers, and to push the scheme of southern conquests, and to maintain them and keep down domestic insurrection, would be the succedaneum for the security conferred by a common government." One can imagine the reaction of the good businessmen, farmers, and cracker barrel politicos of the 1860 Ohio legislature to that! Dennison became "the succedaneum governor" and this unfortunate phrase attracted more notoriety than anything else in his inaugural address, even among Republican newspapers. Again Dennison was described as "frittered in polish," and some Ohioans chose not to take him seriously.8
A Nation Dividing:

Few Americans in early 1860 believed that the controversy over slavery would result in civil war, and fewer yet imagined that it would bring the greatest carnage and tragedy in the nation's history, but many Americans of the time feared a breakup of the Union.

One of Dennison's first official acts as governor was to host a conference in Columbus of state legislators and their guests from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio in late January, 1860. This was the last large-scale attempt to reinvigorate the turn-of-the-century spirit by which early Westerners felt commercial, social, and personal links among all frontiersmen in the valley of the Mississippi. In the days of Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay, Westerners from Cincinnati to New Orleans shared common political goals, but by 1860, these had frayed. The debate in the Ohio legislature over the invitation was sharp, but moderates prevailed, and it was extended. The conference was a lighthearted affair, with sumptuous banquets, luncheons, and breakfasts, all lubricated by copious draughts of Ohio spirits. But the speeches revealed an undercurrent of tension. Governor Beriah Magoffin of Kentucky, though protesting neutrality in the building quarrel between the states, expressed the Southern view as he argued for local option in the territories, for the Fugitive Slave Law, and
in support of the Dred Scott decision. Speeches by Southerners were pro-Union, but pro-South as well. A Tennessee legislator challenged his hosts: "Tennessee is willing to take the Constitution as it is, will Ohio do the same?" Dennison replied in a smooth, conciliatory tone: "Ohio will maintain the Constitution, its compromises and guarantees...We will compose...differences, [the] Union must be preserved."9

Dennison and the Ohio legislators saw their guests off at the railroad station on High Street, and they chugged away in a contented haze. But the very railroad on which they rode symbolized the weakening of old ties. The great river remained the vital commercial link for the planters and merchants of western Kentucky and Tennessee, but Ohioans were looking more and more to east-west trade made possible by the iron horse. And the differences over property rights in human beings increasingly divided Westerners into Northerners and Southerners. Dennison had taken the measure of Magoffin, and he would remember.

South of Ohio's border, anti-abolitionist sentiment was increasing. John Letcher was inaugurated governor of Virginia at the same time Dennison became governor of Ohio. A moderate Democrat within the spectrum of Virginia politics, Letcher was less of a firebrand than Henry A. Wise, whom he succeeded. Yet he called in his inauguration
for strengthening the state militia (as did Dennison in Ohio), for state purchase of arms, and, to the fury of New Englanders, for Virginians to seek business ties to manufacturers in Europe in place of Northern industrialists. Letcher joined the call of many others of all political persuasions for a national convention to resolve the issue of slavery in the territories. On the other hand, he also proposed a clearly impractical and inflammatory scheme for slave states to send delegations to Northern state legislatures to lobby for repeal of personal liberty laws by which Northern states resisted the federal Fugitive Slave Law. To show his resolve, he moved cannon for the militia to towns on the state's northern borders, locking them in county jails for safekeeping. In Kentucky, hostile sentiment was also growing. Beriah Magoffin had been elected governor in 1859 protesting Kentucky neutrality in the slavery dispute, but the state's proslavery partisans were becoming increasingly vocal.¹⁰

Dennison was aware of these developments, but he would not be intimidated. From the start of his administration, and throughout all government executive positions he was to hold, he exhibited a sure-handedness that belied his effete public image. Shortly after taking office, Dennison received a demand from Governor Letcher of Virginia for the return of Owen Brown and Francis Merriam, two of John
Brown's accomplices who were at large in Ohio. He refused, citing technical irregularities with the requisition. Letcher was indignant, and he had the support of many Ohio Democrats, but Dennison toughed him out.\textsuperscript{11}

In another case, a free Ohio black man named William Lago was charged in a Kentucky court with helping a slave escape. Kentucky requested Lago's extradition, but Dennison refused on the grounds that the act for which Lago was charged was not an offence under Ohio law. Kentucky sued in federal court. While the decision to refuse extradition was clearly Dennison's, the subsequent legal defense was the handiwork of Christopher P. Wolcott, Ohio Attorney General, a remarkable man who would play a vital but unremembered role in the Civil War. In \textit{Kentucky v. Dennison} (1861), the United States Supreme Court held that Ohio was obligated to return Lago, but "if the Governor of Ohio refuses to discharge his duty there is no power delegated to the General Government, either through the Judicial Department or any other department, to use any coercive means to compel him."\textsuperscript{12} Once again Dennison had prevailed and once again passions in the border states were inflamed.

In the wake of John Brown's raid, Governor Wise of Virginia had dashed off a curt note demanding that the Ohio governor affirm that no armed bands were forming in Ohio to invade Virginia. Chase responded in kind, denying that any
such crimes were being hatched in Ohio, and informing Wise that he would resist any attempt by Virginia to "pursue armed parties into Ohio." In his last address to the legislature before leaving office, Chase repeated his call for money to strengthen the Ohio militia for the defense of the state's borders, and Dennison echoed that theme in his inaugural. Now, as governor, Dennison turned an unfamiliar eye upon the Ohio militia.

He was aided in this appraisal by his law partner, Henry B. Carrington, whom he kept on as state adjutant general. Carrington had assumed this parttime job in 1857, charged by Chase with reinvigorating a moribund institution. The pugnacious young lawyer took to his task with relish, both because he reveled in amateur soldiering and because, like many thoughtful Americans, he judged that the time for arms might soon be at hand. The militia had been vital in Ohio's early days, when the raw frontier demanded that local citizens band together against Indians and brigands but, as in most other states, it had wasted away during the subsequent long peace. The militia had begun as a compulsory institution, not voluntary as many have since assumed, in which every white male citizen of permanent address between the age of eighteen and forty-five was enrolled by law into a local company under elected officers. By the 1830s, the periodic citizen musters for arms inspection and
rudimentary drill had either been abandoned or had become occasional jollifications resembling county fairs, with much cider, black powder smoke, and politicking. By 1860, even the pretense of an organized common militia had been abandoned in Ohio. The superstructure of regional divisions and brigades survived, their unpaid generals and staff officers supposedly a nucleus for mobilization, but in reality historical fossils. The regional companies, with their onerous compulsory membership, had been abolished by law. Instead, local tax assessors were charged with enrolling all eligible men in an unorganized universal militia when they made their tax valuations, but citizens incurred no military responsibility unless drafted. There had been no draft of the Ohio militia since the War of 1812. By 1860, it had become a vast manpower pool, existing only on paper, by which Ohio claimed about 280,000 enrollees out of a total population of almost 2,400,000.14

But Ohio could muster a jaunty legion of citizen soldiers in 1860, sporting plumes and furs, varicolored millinery, shakos, polished boots, spurs, and shiny muskets. Several volunteer companies existed throughout the state, loosely organized under the state militia. These military social clubs elected their own officers, designed and purchased their own uniforms, and enacted their own
charters and bylaws. Cavalrymen, artillerymen, and officers furnished their own horses, though the state might provide harnesses and similar accoutrements to a crack outfit. The state furnished arms, but little else. The volunteers stood ready to respond to the call of the governor to defend the state, support law enforcement, or aid in disasters; nevertheless, as volunteers, they could opt out of a call or furnish a substitute if they desired. The main activities were socializing, marching in parades, preening in outlandish dress uniforms, and hosting military balls. Carrington worked hard to bring some discipline and order to these happy, prickly, and independent-minded clubs. He authored a manual of standard drill to be practiced in place of (or in addition to) the great variety of choreographed gymnastics with which the volunteers competed for the admiration of their publics during parades, but which would be worse than useless in battle. He had managed to hold two annual encampments of the volunteers, where he formed the companies into provisional regiments and vain-gloriously maneuvered them in mock battle, reveling in the spectacle. This was no small achievement in the face of a parsimonious legislature that was unwilling to fund his department much beyond his own meager stipend. And it is a mistake to conclude that the two thousand or so Ohioans who composed the volunteer militia in 1860 lacked substance or
character. They caroused and skylarked because that was what they believed their peacetime voluntary associations to be for, but when Abraham Lincoln issued his first call for troops to defend Washington D.C. in April 1861, these were the men who went.¹⁵

Neither Carrington nor Dennison could do much more to improve the volunteer militia because they did not have the money to do so. Dennison, and Chase before him, had pressed for drill pay for the volunteers as a means of control as much as an incentive to join, but they had been rebuffed by the legislature. Were not two thousand militiamen enough for any conceivable purpose? Was not a large peacetime military establishment a potential threat to personal liberty? A new state arsenal was under construction in Columbus, but there were few arms to store in it. Particularly after the War of 1812, tens of thousands of weapons, including many cannon, were distributed by the federal government to the states for the militia. In Ohio, these were sometimes stored in local public buildings, but more often they were issued, with varying degrees of accountability, directly to individual citizen militiamen to keep in their homes. After the common militia had been disestablished in 1857, Carrington called these weapons in, but he found that thousands of small arms had vanished, rusted, or had been ruined by misuse. Many cannon were on display in
town squares where they were fired on the 4th of July and whenever else a good bang seemed propitious. Over the decades, these pieces had been subjected to the equivalent of several hard campaigns, and most were ruined by tiny cracks in the cast iron caused by abuse, neglect, and overuse. A "honeycombed" piece could burst and kill or maim its crew, as Carrington discovered during the visit of Whig presidential candidate Winfield Scott to Columbus in 1852. Other cannon had been dismounted and the tubes left to rust in some damp corner while the carriage served out its useful life hauling logs from the forest. The best Dennison could do was to encourage his militia officials to track down as many serviceable state arms as they could, and to again follow Chase's lead by calling upon local elected officials to conscientiously fill their involuntary militia rolls. Distribution of federal arms was in proportion to the enrollment reported by each state, not to its general population, so a large enrollment would net Ohio a bigger share of the next distribution, whenever that might be.16

Politics as Usual:

As absorbing as the day-to-day duties of an executive might be, there was no lack of politics to engage a politician's interest in 1860 Ohio. Chase was returned to the U.S. Senate by the Republican-controlled state legislature shortly after he left the governorship, and no less
than four Ohioans figured as potential Republican candidates for president that year. Chase was the front-runner, respected for his political clout but beloved by few; Benjamin Wade was the champion of the Cleveland wing of hard liners; and moderate ex-Whig John McLean along with old campaigner Tom Corwin represented the conservative Cincinnati wing. Intra-party partisanship ran as high as ever that year as the kaleidoscopic quality of Ohio politics kept loyalties local, personal and unpredictable.

An urbane Dennison, again in his role as party conciliator, attended a dinner in Washington, D.C. in late April hosted by Ohio Congressman John Gurley, and watched Chase, Wade, and Corwin spar for political advantage. Another guest and presidential aspirant, William H. Seward, described those present as "three candidates for Republican President from Ohio, each wanting anyone outside Ohio to the other two." Dennison, "pleasant and well cultivated," was not one of the three. 17

The state Republican convention convened March 1 in Columbus. Ominously for Dennison, he was not elected a delegate to the national convention in Chicago that summer. He would attend, and engage in party infighting, but the Governor of Ohio would not cast a vote. David K. Cartter of the Cleveland wing, the only candidate to run against Dennison for the party's nomination for governor the year
before, was elected chairman of the Ohio delegation to Chicago. After much backing and filling, the state convention adopted a weak resolution calling upon its national delegates to "indicate [Chase] as their first choice." None of them felt any overwhelming obligation to comply, and Chase partisans warned their man of increasing distrust and divisiveness among state Republicans. Newspaper accounts of the convention hardly mention Dennison, as if he were a minor player in the proceedings. Clearly, to Ohio Republicans, Dennison was not Chase. He did not command Chase's clout, he was a moderate compromise between two powerful wings of his party, and his support was thin and superficial. Dennison was Ohio's gentleman governor, a handsome but insubstantial ornament.

The Democratic party had broken in Charleston in April and again at Baltimore in early May; consequently, as the Republicans gathered in Chicago in mid May, it seemed as though they might for the first time nominate the next president. But Dennison arrived at the Wigwam with a fractious Ohio delegation whose members were more interested in settling old scores within state politics than they were inspired by the portent of the moment. Chase was the only Ohioan who was a serious national candidate, and he had to contend with heavyweights William H. Seward of New York and Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, as well as with a
host of favorite sons. His star faded fast as his own Ohio delegation failed to support him. There were rumors that a cabal of Ohio pols, including Cartter, Wolcott, Giddings, Corwin, and Dennison connived to back Benjamin Wade for the nomination so that Wade's U. S. Senate seat would become available for one of them. That seems far-fetched, since the nomination of Chase would also have opened up a Senate seat, but it is clear that the Ohio leaders abandoned Chase, either because they thought he could not win or to settle old scores. They most likely threw their support to Wade as a favorite son as a way to park some Ohio votes on the first few ballots to see who the front-runner would be and what kind of political benefit they could garner for backing the winner. One unlikely report in the Ohio State Journal had Dennison announcing for Seward as he alighted from the train on the first day. Dennison was too shrewd for such a blunder, and the Journal, a Chase organ, may have been trying to pressure or discredit him. For the most part, the Journal ignored Dennison at the convention, as if not wanting its readers reminded of their Republican governor. The contest came down to Lincoln vs Seward, and a four vote shift within the Ohio delegation on the fourth ballot gave the nomination to Honest Abe from Illinois.19

Dennison was pleased. He was one of the Ohioans who approached Lincoln suggesting Chase as the "Ohio man" in
his cabinet. That was no doubt self-serving. Dennison may have been trying to mend fences or to open up Chase's Senate seat which he now eyed for himself. But Chase was livid. He fumed that the Ohio delegation had "hatch[ed] wooden eggs," and he growled to his confederates about betrayal while coyly eschewing any interest in a potential cabinet job. Chase blamed Dennison personally for his rebuff, though direct evidence to support his conclusion is sketchy. He appeared with Dennison at Republican rallies in Columbus to support the national ticket, and the two worked together in the subsequent dark days of the Civil War, but Chase never forgave Dennison. This was their great rupture, and Chase was forever alert for the opportunity to do Dennison in.20

Rumors of War:

Lincoln's election that November was the spark for tragedy. South Carolina seceded on December 20, 1860, to be followed by the other states of the deep South, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana, before the end of January. Turmoil increased in the border states, as true believers on both sides vied for the loyalty of the uncommitted. Union rallies were held in Wheeling and Parkersburg, just across the Ohio River in Virginia, and the government in Richmond prepared to strengthen its border. Hard-liner William L. Yancy of South Carolina made
a sweep of the Ohio border country, whipping up anti-
Republican sentiment and openly calling for secession
should Lincoln win. He drew a crowd of over 3000 in
Cincinnati, and many more in Kentucky. Even after the South
Carolina secession, many thoughtful Americans still
believed that this domestic quarrel could be patched up.
The German-American journalist, statesman, founding
Republican, and soon-to-be general Carl Schurz tried a bit
of sarcasm when he predicted the secessionists would "go
out, take two drinks, and come back again." But most
Americans were not amused. They were deeply alarmed.

Dennison was also alarmed. He had welcomed Lincoln's
moderate position within the national Republican spectrum,
particularly the latter's insistence on respecting slavery
where it existed, but he now felt the need to re-evaluate
his own stance in light of the real danger of a breakup of
the Union. His opportunity came with the traditional Annual
Address of the Governor to the Legislature, the State-of-
the-State Address of its day.

On January 7, 1861, after the South Carolina secession
but two days before Mississippi became the next state to
follow suit, Dennison delivered his speech. He defended his
actions in the cases of Lago and the Brown conspirators,
arguing that there was no provision in the Constitution
compelling a state to enforce laws of other jurisdictions
which were not offenses under its own law. He was deeply concerned about secessionist sentiment, particularly in Kentucky, and sought by his message to strengthen Unionist sentiment there. In a private letter to Giddings the day of his speech, Dennison shared intelligence from his agents in Kentucky: "not at all encouraging. Kentucky will go with them [referring to 'the cotton states']." In a major reversal of his previous positions, Dennison argued for repeal of state personal liberty laws in return for the elimination of the "obnoxious features" of the Fugitive Slave Law. He argued that the causes of division between the sections, "the discontents," as he put it, could be avoided, and he suggested that the free states must take the lead in reconciliation. While staunchly defending the Constitution as he interpreted it, and while abhorring slavery, he offered southern states: "all that may be consistent with right, justice, humanity, and the demands of a Christian civilization."22

Having held up his olive branch, Dennison went on to denounce secession, claiming that the reasons set out by the Southern states were pretexts, and that the real causes were the loss of political power by Southern elites to the inevitable march of free men. The North and West had grown greatly in recent times and had taken their proper place in the federal government as befitted their larger population.
He labeled secession treason and called once again upon the legislature to strengthen the militia. Again Dennison had labored long and thoughtfully on his speech. He boasted of it to Giddings and sent a copy to Lincoln in Springfield, calling attention to what he termed its conciliatory tone. Years later he would recall it to friends as his most important address, and boast that he was the first leading Republican in the Nation to offer those concessions.23

But events were overtaking politicians. A significant shift to the Democrats occurred in local Ohio elections in April 1861, as Ohioans had second thoughts when the reality of secession sunk in. Against all Republican expectations, a Democrat was elected mayor of Cleveland, joining a Democratic chief executive in Cincinnati. Bright young Republican hopefuls like Rutherford B. Hayes were defeated for local office, losing to a "Union-saving avalanche." Dennison at first equivocated over sending a delegation to the Washington Peace Conference in February, distrusting the enterprise. He telegraphed Governor John A. Andrew to ask if Massachusetts would send delegates, and was advised that he too was undecided. "I say postpone until after the inauguration," Andrews grumbled.24 In the end Dennison did appoint a delegation, including Chase, who fumed that he had not been consulted and that he was being set up for a political embarrassment. William Groesbeck, his old Miami
chum now a prominent Cincinnati Democrat, and the indomitable Wolcott, who became Dennison's man at the conference, were also appointed.25

Abraham Lincoln visited Columbus in February on his way to his inauguration. The Neil House had burned down shortly before, so Lincoln and his wife Mary spent the night in the Dennison home, much to Anne's delight, and Dennison's long-term benefit. Honest Abe was subdued and somber, peering with dark eyes over the full beard grown since the convention in an attempt to soften his gaunt angular features. He had asked for "no ceremonies that will waste time" in Columbus, but could not avoid a massive reception at the State House where the crowd was so great and the crush so severe that he retreated up the grand staircase and waved as the throng surged past. He gave a strange, somber little speech, in which he attempted to assuage passions with the line: "for there is nothing going wrong...all we want is time...and a reliance on that God who has never forsaken this people."26 Dennison and his banker friend William G. Deshler, flanking the president-elect during the speech, seemed nonplussed. That evening Lincoln renewed his acquaintance with the urbane Ohio governor, unburdening himself of fears for the defense of Washington and insisting that nothing should be done to provoke the border states, especially Kentucky, to secede. Both were relieved
when a telegram arrived from Chase informing Lincoln that Congress had ratified the vote of the Electoral College naming him president. The rumor that the vote would be the secret signal for a Southern seizure of the Capitol, White House, and other government buildings proved false, and Chase reported an uneasy calm in Washington.  

Lincoln announced Chase for Secretary of the Treasury, and a scramble broke out in the Ohio legislature to fill Chase's U. S. Senate seat. Dennison worked hard for the job, calling in all his political IOUs and reminding Republican legislators of his long labors for party unity. Though Dennison was the front-runner in early ballots, in the end the plum went to taciturn and brilliant John Sherman, U. S. Congressman from Mansfield. Dennison was crushed. He remained convinced all his life that he owed this defeat to Chase. In large part this was true, but there were other reasons as well. Some from the Cincinnati wing of the party reasoned that by giving the seat to Sherman, a moderate within the Cleveland wing, they would be in a stronger position the next year to oppose the re-election of hard-line U. S. Senator Benjamin Wade, since they could claim that a Cincinnati man deserved the seat out of fairness and party balance. And some hard-liners from the Cleveland wing had never accepted Dennison's moderate position within the party, just as some
conservatives of the Cincinnati wing remembered with distaste his drift to the right during his gubernatorial campaign. At a time of strong passions, Dennison paid the price for moderation. It would not be the last time.

By April 1861 there was little room for compromise in the hearts of Ohioans. Sunday sermons in Columbus that spring included "A Time to Die," and "Let Him Who Stole Steal No More." Carrington took to the stump in Columbus twice in early April with a blood-stirring call to arms: "The Hour, The Peril, The Duty." "Tell me not you prefer fraternal blood to the lash of the master and despot," he thundered, "no blood is so costly as that which strangles a coward's heart. You shall rejoice in every sacrifice...for the whole continent shall be free, and the nations of the world shall pay you homage." More blood and sacrifice were close at hand than ever such bombast could foretell.
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CHAPTER IV


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CHAPTER V

WAR GOVERNOR I: IMPROVISING

"The ball is open. War is inaugurated!" came the cry in Columbus on April 12, 1861, as news of rebel firing on Ft. Sumter that morning reached the city. To some it seemed that a great burden had been lifted as the tension of the previous weeks was broken. To others, it was a time for dread and introspection. Its members unwilling to adjourn while the national crisis deepened, the Ohio Senate was in session that Friday when the sergeant-at-arms rushed in with the news. From the gallery, abolitionist and feminist Abby Kelly Foster stunned the senators to silence with a piercing, shrill cry: "Thank God! 'Tis the death knell of slavery!" Others were more somber. One senator wrote: "With most of us, the gloomy thought that civil war had begun in our own land overshadowed everything, and seemed too great a price to pay for any good; a scourge to be borne only in preference to yielding the very groundwork of our republicanism...."

A wave of patriotism and war fever washed over Ohioans that April. Americans were caught up in the pageantry and glory of war in the Victorian age even as they dreaded that
they had failed the legacy of the Founding Fathers by breaking the Union and sinking to fratricide. For the next few weeks citizens jostled for news, flocked to arms, and repeated sensational rumors.4

In the "Governor's Room" of the new Ohio State House, Governor William Dennison Jr. sat at his table in one corner assisted by the lone secretary who was his entire personal staff, patiently and courteously receiving all who demanded his attention. Across the room Adjutant General Henry B. Carrington held forth among a gathering crowd of bewildered militia staff officers hastily summoned from their peacetime pursuits. Energetic and sincere, Carrington knew what should be done, but not always how to do it. Nor was Dennison's hand at the helm of state any great comfort to Ohioans, most of whom were at best indifferent to their "gentleman governor," judging him hardly qualified to lead in peace let alone in war. In the first few days Dennison labored mostly alone, grappling with many uncertainties. Should he mobilize state troops? If so, how many and where? Would a mobilization be provocative and therefore counterproductive? And what was President Lincoln doing in Washington? A maddening intermittent failure of the telegraph to Washington, made worse by delays in the mail, would plague Dennison and other governors for weeks. How would he pay for mobilization, and how would the
unpredictable legislature react to a request for a war appropriation? But it was also very clear to Dennison that he must act. As the remaining nine months of his term unfolded, Dennison would act, and would become increasingly sure-handed and forceful in managing Ohio's war effort and dealing with the federal government. He would stumble and err, he would alienate powerful men, and he would pay a steep political price. But in the end he would succeed and, beneath the gentility and grace, William Dennison Jr. would reveal a hard core of public virtue.

To the Defense of Washington City:

Some of Dennison's uncertainty was resolved the evening of Monday, April 15, when Lincoln's proclamation calling out 75,000 state militiamen for federal service reached Columbus. Ohio's share of the call was a bit more than ten thousand men. Simultaneously, Dennison received an urgent request from the Secretary of War for two regiments for the immediate defense of Washington. The state did not have ten thousand ready soldiers, and Dennison knew that he would have to raise, organize, and equip them from volunteers or from a draft of the common militia, and that either course would take time. But he did have a bit more than two thousand men in the volunteer militia available at once, and Dennison resolved to offer the major portion of those troops to answer the call. He telegraphed the commanders of
fifteen volunteer companies throughout the state, directing them to bring their men to Columbus by rail the next day. Dennison and Carrington then walked together in the night to the homes of five Columbus volunteer company commanders to deliver the riot call in person. It must have been quite a sight, the jaunty little adjutant general in his natty uniform with his sword at his side and buckshot in his pocket, marching resolutely through the gaslight, trailed by the tall gentleman governor with the grave countenance and the silk hat.6

"We can move two regiments this week...will that answer?" Dennison cabled to Secretary of War Simon Cameron on April 16. "Yes; send them on," came the reply that same day.7 The militiamen streamed into town, and soon proud military clubs with names like Lancaster Guards, Columbus Videttes, Covington Blues, and Springfield Zouaves became companies in the 1st and 2nd Regiments, Ohio Volunteer Infantry (OVI). To lead them to Washington, Dennison resorted to a management technique he would use repeatedly during his war administration, that of naming a governor's agent for a specific mission. He appointed State Senator George W. McCook his agent, "with authority to command," armed McCook with a draft for $10,000 against the state treasury, and charged him to deliver the two regiments to federal authorities in Washington, doing his best to outfit
them with uniforms, blankets, and field gear along the way. 8

Although he could have appointed a brigadier general or chosen one of several district generals of the common militia for this job, Dennison chose a prominent politician instead. One reason for such a decision is that a general at the head of these 1500 men would count as a part of Ohio's quota of the president's call. That quota included one major general and three brigadiers, and Dennison wished to keep them near home as long as possible for the defense of Ohio and the West. These generals would very soon have ten thousand men to organize. Furthermore, as of Tuesday, April 16, he had not yet selected them. His reason for not choosing a general of the common militia may also have been distrust of the political loyalty or military skill of such men. One very vocal general of the Ohio common militia at the time was U. S. Congressman and prominent Democrat Clement L. Vallandingham of Dayton, who became the most prominent anti-war activist in Ohio, and who traveled to Columbus from Washington that first weekend of the war to lobby Ohioans against supporting Lincoln. Many militia generals were Democrats, and though a great many Democrats would embrace the Union cause, that was not clear in mid-April. 9 As for military skill, Carrington and most of his staff were proving to be men who, at best, were better at
thinking about soldiering than doing it. That was not much of a recommendation for the rest of the militia generals. But Dennison most likely chose an agent over a general of common militia because he saw the agent's job as equipping and delivering a group of unarmed citizens to Washington. He wanted someone who shared that view, and who would not become preoccupied with leading them in a fight.

In the cold pre-dawn of April 19 McCook and his band chugged off on an odyssey through Pennsylvania that included many transportation delays, provisioning misadventures, a few missed meals, cold nights, wet, boredom, scores of indignant complaints, and the general muck-up to be expected in such circumstances. The two regiments were eventually mustered into federal service at Lancaster, Pennsylvania on April 30, and a frazzled McCook went home to report to Dennison that his job was done. The men were then issued muskets and learned that "hurry up and wait" was the same in federal as in state service, though they no longer had a governor's agent to look after them. Towards the end of their 90-day enlistments, the men fought at Bull Run as part of Daniel Tyler's division. They were briefly engaged in a delaying action along the Warrington Pike by the Stone Bridge, and they succeeded in remaining together under discipline in spite of that debacle.
The Queen City:

Meanwhile, in Cincinnati and the river towns, news of war caused equal if not greater turmoil than in Columbus. Men formed impromptu military companies and marched the streets bellowing patriotic songs. Wild tales of invasion abounded, including rumors of a secret uprising by gangs of rebel partisans, armed to the teeth, and smuggled into town by domestic sympathizers. Self-appointed armed vigilantes strutted about professing their readiness to defend the city. Wild tales circulated of great flotillas of steamboats churning upriver, loaded to the gunnels with whiskey-sodden yahoos waving Bowie knives.11

As silly as these reactions may have been, they represented but one manifestation of a complex and evolving public opinion. Queen City citizens had deep commercial, social, and family ties to the South. City merchants still conducted much of their trade downriver, even as their East-West commerce was increasing. In the immediate aftermath of Ft. Sumter, trade in war materiel to the South continued. Many city residents were openly sympathetic to the Southern cause and several enlisted in the Confederate Army. In April, the fact that Kentucky had not seceded and Virginia had not joined the Confederacy gave heart to the substantial portion of the population that still advocated a negotiated solution to the conflict. Prominent city
newspaper editors such as Washington McLean and Murat Halstead advocated reconciliation or peaceful separation. Cincinnati was a stronghold of the Democratic Party in Ohio, and its citizens had recently elected a Democratic mayor. In January, a prominent Democratic state senator from the city had proclaimed "the 200,000 Democrats of Ohio" stood ready to block any invasion of the South from the state. Yet Cincinnati Mayor George Hatch proved to be what would soon be called a War Democrat, and a majority of citizens shared his sentiments. The city contributed $250,000 to the state's war chest, then chartered and armed two steamers as police boats to patrol the river. War Democrats were soon to join with Republicans in an uneasy alliance called the Union Party, united only in determination to restore the Union. The remaining Democrats further diffused their strength. Some became aligned with the Copperhead faction that supported the Southern cause; and some became opponents of armed coercion of one region by another, while maintaining distance from the cause of the slaveholder.12

Majority sentiment was soon for the Union. The Stars and Stripes flew from every masthead, and Lincoln's call for troops brought thousands to the standard. William H. Lytle, wealthy Cincinnati lawyer, prominent Democratic politician, popular romantic poet, and district major general of common
militia, reacted in the spirit of the old militia of Indian fighting days by ordering on his own initiative a secret reconnaissance of the Covington, Kentucky hills on April 16th to select sites for possible defense of the city. He chose for this task a local railroad president, West Point graduate, and fellow Mexican War veteran George B. McClellan, and then gallantly urged McClellan to forward his report directly to Dennison. That was prophetic. Lytle went on with great energy and verve to organize the first few regiments of volunteers from the city. He soon entered the Ohio volunteer service himself as a colonel commanding a regiment. True to the spirit of the mid-century Victorian romantics, Lytle was conspicuously brave, an able commander, wounded twice, captured, exchanged, promoted to general, and killed in action at the head of his troops at Chickamauga.13

"I Will Defend Ohio...":

During his administration, Dennison was concerned lest Ohio be attacked from the South, particularly before substantial Union forces were raised in the West and before federal offensive operations were begun. Kentucky had not seceded, and Virginia's status in April and early May was somewhat ambivalent, though the Richmond government was strongly for the Confederacy. Dennison believed both states would join the rebels. He held that their delay in
declaring their affiliation was not indecision but a clever conspiracy by slaveholders to maintain a shield of border states until the South could organize and raise an army. This concern became a preoccupation as rumors of invasion spread. Carrington was insistent that Ohio could best be defended at the mountain passes of western Virginia rather than along the Ohio River, a not unreasonable strategic judgment. A widely read potboiler by self-anointed Napoleonic grand strategist Emil Schalk, popular in Columbus at the time, argued that the South must strike early for a quick victory lest the North have time to mobilize its superior resources. Schalk went on to suggest that the South's wisest strategy was to field small holding armies in the Piedmont and along the Mississippi to threaten Washington and Cairo, while concentrating its main strength for a thrust at the Union's narrow Ohio waist. He went on to speculate that the decisive battle of the war would come in the open country of central Ohio. It could also be speculated that, driving from Covington and Wheeling to Columbus and Cleveland, this push could cut the North in two, go on the defensive in the Pennsylvania mountains, open trade with British Canada, deny the West's food to the East, and allow the South to offer negotiations from a position of strength. That Jefferson Davis and his advisors would not choose such a strategy could not have
been known to Dennison at the time. It sounded good and there was precious little to stop it. In a meeting early in the war, Dennison is quoted as intoning to his advisors: "I will defend Ohio where it costs least and accomplishes most...beyond rather than on her border!"14

It was his concern for the defense of the state that prompted Dennison to raise additional state regiments over those authorized by the first call of the President, though he released the troops to federal service in response to subsequent calls. It is also why Dennison mounted heavy fixed artillery at Cincinnati and why he kept the only ready-for-action field artillery battery in his pre-war volunteer militia from both the call to defend Washington and from the federal military department commander in Cincinnati. Furthermore, Dennison allotted 6000 rifled muskets and five field artillery pieces, with ammunition and accoutrements, to the common militia of the Ohio River border counties during his administration. These shopkeepers, mechanics, and farmers, now called the Militia of the Reserve, were given state arms at the very time that Dennison was scrambling to find arms for his volunteer regiments and when federal field commanders were calling for more Ohio troops, even suggesting that Dennison was slow to forward them.15 Professional soldiers may have snorted that a hayseed militia could never stop an army of
Johnny Rebs, and they would have been right. The phrase, "I will defend Ohio...beyond...her borders," also led to charges that Dennison interfered with the decisions of federal military commanders, and to boasts by Republican partisans after the war that it was Dennison who opened offensive operations in western Virginia in May 1861, not George B. McClellan, the federal commander. Both conclusions do not hold up to inquiry, as will be discussed. But the gestures did strengthen Union sentiment in the border counties and, most importantly, did demonstrate politically Dennison's concern for the defense of his state.

War Legislation:

Without a veto, Dennison had less influence with the Ohio legislature than Lincoln did with Congress though, as in both governments, it was party affiliation and back room politicking that were the true engines of governance. Yet Dennison needed war legislation to comply with Lincoln's call and to defend the state. He moved quickly to surround himself with advisors to help on the political front. The multi-talented Christopher P. Wolcott shifted from attorney general to judge advocate general, though neither title fully reflects his many services to the Union cause. Close unofficial advisors included Joseph R. Swan, Dennison's successor as president of the Columbus and Xenia Railroad and the Ohio Supreme Court chief justice who lost
re-nomination over the Oberlin Rescue cases, and Noah H. Swayne, a prominent Columbus lawyer and string-puller. Dennison doubled his personal staff by appropriating as an aide the Senate librarian, newsman, author, and Republican stalwart William T. Coggeshall. Foot soldiers to the legislature were two young Republican state senators, Jacob D. Cox and James A. Garfield, both destined to become generals and post-war statesmen.

Tidings of war brought temporary unity to the normally fractious Ohio legislature. On April 12, legislators scrambled to pass the only militia bill available on their docket, one which they had previously ignored. It authorized a tiny annual stipend to each volunteer militia company in proportion to the number of state arms it maintained, with a slight bonus to artillery units. This bill had languished since the Chase administration, and represented a halting step toward the drill pay for volunteers that Chase, Carrington, and Dennison had advocated for years, but it was no help at all in raising troops for the President's call. On April 16 they got their teeth into something useful. Dennison sent up a war appropriation bill calling for $500,000 to support the federal call for troops, $450,000 to purchase state arms, and $50,000 as a special contingency fund for the governor. It passed on the 18th after heated debate. This "million dollar bill"
dazzled Ohioans, who assumed that such munificence must necessarily transform into legions of natty soldiers and cornucopias of war goods. When that did not happen at once, Dennison took the blame, even from those who should have known better.17

In the next few weeks, the legislature passed more war bills. It authorized two million dollars more in military expenditures. It set the rules for commissioning officers and filling vacancies. It acquiesced to Dennison's insistence that he raise regiments in state service over and above the numbers called for by the President. It protected soldiers from debt collection while in service and, it prohibited the sale of liquor within two miles of a military camp. Significantly, it also passed a new militia act putting teeth in the existing law for enrolling all white male citizens of military age in the common militia. Local tax assessors were still charged with compiling the militia rolls, but for the first time assessors and all other citizens were subject to penalties for failure to comply. This act set the stage for a draft of the common militia should that become necessary. Dennison never resorted to a draft, since there were sufficient volunteers during his administration, but his successor did, amid great public turmoil and agony, and eventually the federal government took over the draft mechanism nationwide.18
The legislature lingered in session for weeks, well beyond its usual spring adjournment time. A treason bill proposed by Garfield had it wallowing in vindictiveness trying to define and punish treason against the state. Some Democrats, led by State Senator Thomas M. Key of Cincinnati, had balked at the million dollar bill, complaining that it was an unwarranted declaration of war against the seven sister states of the South. A fiery Garfield exploded with rage and charged that Democrats "embraced traitors among [their] most distinguished members," all but accusing the venerable Judge Key of treason. In the end grudging harmony was restored when most Democrats, including Key, voted for the money bill "under protest." Dennison no doubt wished that the legislature would go home and leave him to get on with the war, but it turned to an indignant review of the conduct of his military subordinates, eventually voting no confidence in two senior officers. More ominously, as the session was adjourned on May 13, it was already clear to Republican leaders that some sort of a political compromise with War Democrats would be necessary to avoid losing the state elections that year. Garfield's intemperance, and that of some other Republican hard-liners, now became a liability to the party. While Dennison remained properly aloof from these legislative machinations, his association with
Garfield, his perceived drift to the right during his gubernatorial campaign in 1859, and public dissatisfaction with his initial acts as war governor, now greatly weakened him within his party, with grave implications for his re-nomination in the fall.

"Organize Yourselves Into Companies":

When Lincoln's first call for troops arrived on April 15, Dennison issued a proclamation of his own, relaying that of the President, and calling upon Ohioans to "organize yourselves into companies and notify me thereof." Even as it was being wired to newspapers throughout the state, someone alerted Dennison that the legislature had just passed a militia enrollment bill stipulating that the paperwork for such volunteer companies reach the governor only through the common militia regional brigade and division headquarters. The discrepancy was trivial, even arguable, but Dennison chose to issue a second proclamation the same day with the quintessential Dennisonian line: "The General Assembly, by act just passed, opens to you the method of testifying your devotion..." and "orders issued through the proper Department, assert that method, and invite your response." The first proclamation was flawed in that it did not make clear that the volunteer companies should stay home and report by telegraph or by mail for instructions. But the second did not correct that
mistake, was barely intelligible, and served only to worsen the confusion. It is doubtful that many Ohioans understood the second proclamation since few could have known about the "law just passed," so they harkened to the first and hopped on the next train for Columbus. Once again, convoluted rhetoric and downright prissiness had robbed Dennison of a chance to be decisive and, deservedly, he was blamed for the resultant confusion.

Thousands of fire-eyed volunteers intent upon saving the Union flooded into Columbus on a wave of patriotism, overwhelming Dennison's military staff. Carrington could not keep up with the tally, and throngs milled about demanding instructions. Common sense should have dictated that the men be enrolled and sent home with a state travel voucher to await mustering orders, but Dennison said no, fearing it would cool the ardor. Militia Commissary General George W. Runyan stepped off the train from his home in Cincinnati to find himself responsible for billeting the multitude, and settled upon local hotels, as much for feeding as for shelter. But at $1.25 a day per man, that could not be sustained for long. In any event, hotels and boarding houses soon overflowed, and men were billeted in the penitentiary, armory, insane asylum, warehouses, and any other space that could be found. The volunteers groused, and the public was indignant. One concerned
minister wrote Dennison suggesting that since the state could not care for its soldiers, perhaps they should be temporarily billeted in private homes. Dennison politely declined. It took only a couple of days for a camp to be established at the fairground followed by a second along the river north of town, and for messing contracts to be let at a reasonable price, but ridicule of the gentleman governor and his comic opera general staff was rampant. Men of one lucky company found themselves bedding down in the rotunda of the State House and were ending their day with a full-throated chorus of hymns. They were reaching a crescendo of "I'm Glad I'm in this Army" when a second company, detailed to share the billet, entered upon the stone floor marching in cadence behind a fife and drum. The din made the great stone dome reverberate like a huge, discordant bell and, in the nearby Governor's Room, the gentleman governor must have held his head among his crowd of petitioners.

It did not take long for Dennison to realize that he needed a competent soldier, preferably several, to assist him. Ohio's share of the President's call for troops was about as large as the combined call from all other Union states west of Pennsylvania, and included the only major general from that region, so Dennison assumed that this general would command operations in the West. On April 20,
he wired Secretary of War Simon Cameron asking for a senior federal officer to take command at Cincinnati for the defense of the city and the West "in cooperation with myself," but he was rebuffed. Dennison's first choice was Major Irvin McDowell, a Columbus native, and a favorite on the Army staff in Washington, but Cameron would not release him. About this time George B. McClellan's letter arrived from Cincinnati, detailing recommendations for the defense of the city and also making farreaching suggestions for the management of state troops, provisioning, training, and like matters. Dennison had never met McClellan, and only knew that he was a former U. S. Army captain with a good Mexican War record who had resigned at a time of stagnant military promotions to try railroading. Dennison may or may not have known that McClellan had been a favorite of General Winfield Scott, had been selected as an official observer to the Crimean War, and had been noted as an up-and comer in the Army. On the strength of the letter, and upon the recommendation of some Cincinnati businessmen, Dennison summoned McClellan for an interview. Dennison was not put off by the younger man's Democratic leanings, suppressed annoyance at his condescending air, and offered him command of Ohio volunteer forces with the rank of major general. McClellan promptly accepted. Dennison had to maneuver the legislature into passing a bill allowing him
to appoint a major general of volunteers from outside the ranks of the common militia generals, but his political skills were up to it. He no doubt expected that his new top soldier would set up shop in town and relieve him of the burden of managing recruits, but McClellan took a quick look around, offered some perfunctory advice to Carrington, extracted a promise that the remaining troops of the President's call would be sent to him at Cincinnati for training after they had been formed into regiments, and promptly entrained for the Queen City to establish his headquarters.  

Dennison followed different criteria when selecting the three brigadier generals for the President's call, putting more emphasis on politics. He chose Newton Schleich, Democratic leader of the state senate, thus reaching out to the War Democrats. His next choice was Joshua H. Bates, likewise a Democrat. Bates was also prominent brigadier general of the common militia, and his appointment was a way for Dennison to mend fences with that still influential constituency that was smarting since McClellan, an outsider, had landed the plum job. Dennison's final selection was Republican state senator Jacob D. Cox, a level-headed politician who was something of an amateur military scholar. Of the three, only Cox would achieve success as a fighting general. His selection cannot be attributed to
clairvoyance on Dennison's part, however. Cox was chosen to be Dennison's man on McClellan's war council, something he did faithfully until the exigencies of the service moved them to different commands.24

Appointing four generals was a good start, but Dennison had dozens more senior soldiers to appoint. At the start of the war Ohio law continued the old militia tradition of allowing the men of each company to elect their own captain and lieutenants, but field grade officers were appointed by the governor. Dennison had to find colonels, lieutenant colonels, and majors to lead the eleven remaining regiments of the first call and the additional state regiments he was forming at the same time. Again, his first choices were regular army officers. Lt. Orlando Poe of the Corps of Engineers was in town on leave when the war started, having just completed a topographical survey of the upper Great Lakes; Poe helped out in the Governor's Room for a few days until McClellan snatched him to be his staff engineer. A couple of regular second lieutenants sidled into the Governor's Room early in the war, sniffing about for greater rank in state service, but Cameron replied to Dennison's request for them with the quip that he had no time to detail lieutenants. It was clear that there were few regulars to be had. The federals were husbanding regular officers, and every state governor, North and
South, was competing for them, holding out high commissions as inducements. In response, Washington stipulated that regulars must resign their federal commissions to accept state ones, and that cooled the rush, since federal commissions at the time were, in effect, life sinecures.25

It was obvious to Dennison that he must look elsewhere for field grade officers. A few Ohioans were veterans of the Mexican War and many, like Lytle, came forward. But not all were again volunteers, and not all were still fit for field service. For example, one veteran wrote Dennison that he would go if asked, but stipulated that he be assigned duty where he did not have to walk much. That was a big help! Dennison resorted to his common sense and his concept of public virtue. If he must choose from among the militarily ignorant, he would choose those who were successful in civil life, and who were, by Dennison's lights, the right sort. That is how bright young Republicans like lawyer Rutherford B. Hayes and State Senator James A. Garfield became major and lieutenant colonel in Ohio regiments, and that is how Dennison's brother Erasmus and eldest son William Neil became majors.26 This was not the first nor the last time in American history that officers were selected in such a way, nor was it necessarily wrong, when judged by the results. It was inevitable. But some of them turned out to be better talkers than fighters, and a
few were outright charlatans, knaves, or nincompoops, and Dennison took the blame.

Dennison and Carrington learned from their initial blunder and established state camps at fairgrounds throughout Ohio where the state regiments they were raising in excess of the first federal call could be organized near the men's homes. But McClellan was eager for the eleven remaining regiments of the first call, so the 3d though the 13th OVI were concentrated just north of Cincinnati at a spot along the Little Miami Railroad that McClellan named Camp Dennison. There, as the regiments were mustered into federal service and removed from Dennison's control, occurred a muck-up of the first order. Eager volunteers tumbled from railcars during a rainstorm in late April to find a bare, muddy field. Bates took charge at first and was soon joined by Cox. McClellan remained aloof in Cincinnati and sent Poe to lay out the camp and bristle his regulars' hackles at working with civilian generals. Shelters were improvised from canvas and green lumber dumped at trackside, latrines were dug after a fashion, cooks were appointed who were about as competent at that job as they were at soldiering, and fresh water was brought in via a wooden pipe. Soon regiments and brigades were marching and countermarching, and order was becoming apparent to the most optimistic, when the federal government dropped a
bombshell. The word "snafu" would await coining by soldiers of another great war eighty years later, but it correctly describes what happened next. General-in-Chief Winfield Scott properly foresaw a long war in which the 90-day enlistments mandated by federal and state militia laws would be too short to train troops and conduct campaigns before the men must be sent home. The federal call was therefore changed, and men were asked to enlist for three years or the duration of the war, whichever came first. This applied even to those who were already serving a federal 90-day enlistment, such as those at Camp Dennison. Many balked. McClellan proved both short-tempered and short-sighted over the matter, sending home without pay those who would not volunteer for the longer term. Those men felt insulted and voiced their indignation when they got home, hampering recruiting efforts and, to Dennison's greater concern, undermining support for the war. Too few remained at Camp Dennison to sustain the original number of company grade officers, so captains and lieutenants about to lose their commissions campaigned like political hucksters at a county fair for the few remaining vacancies. Discipline broke down; Poe fumed; Cox and Bates behaved more like conciliation lawyers than commanders; and McClellan revised his estimate of how long it would take to "render them manageable." Dennison and other governors
intervened with Lincoln and the federal order was changed. All volunteers were welcomed back; all kept their original rank or grade; those who were not willing to sign up for three years were allowed to leave with pay after 90 days; and new men were recruited to fill the vacancies. Dennison had reason to muse that professional soldiers too could be nincompoops, but McClellan's clever naming of Camp Dennison meant that much of the public blamed the governor, though in fact he had no authority there.

Taking Charge:

As the remainder of his term unfolded, Dennison became increasingly forceful and sure-handed in managing his war administration, overcoming obstacles, and dealing with the federal government. Before the end of April, he faced a challenge from the Ohio legislature when it demanded copies of all troop provisioning contracts. An investigation followed, leading to a resolution of no confidence in the commissary general and quartermaster general for the embarrassing muddle that had transpired at the start of mobilization. Ignoring Carrington, who retained some political support, the legislators pointedly rejected a move by Dennison loyalists to express confidence in the governor. At first Dennison resisted action since his sense of propriety and his belief that the initial blunders had been corrected recoiled against what he saw as political
scapegoating. But he had to admit that his military staff was at best struggling, and he still needed too much from the legislators to defy them on this issue. On May 6 he reluctantly asked Runyan to resign, followed in a few days by Quartermaster General D. L. Wood. Dennison was fortunate to find an old soldier, Catharinius P. Buckingham, to help out. Buckingham was 53 years old, an 1829 graduate of the Military Academy, and had served a short stint as an artilleryman, topographical surveyor, and instructor at West Point before resigning from the regular army to become a professor at Kenyon College, found an iron business, and build railroads. He was clear-headed, disciplined, and methodical, and soon brought order to the commissary department. Dennison's more delicate problem was Adjutant General Carrington. His friend and law partner was loyal and dedicated, but had proven too excitable and disorganized to be a chief of staff. The answer came in May when the federal government announced that it was expanding the regular army by ten regiments. It is not clear whether it was Dennison's influence during a Washington trip or Chase's in the Cabinet that secured the appointment—perhaps both men influenced the decision—but on June 1 Carrington became a regular army colonel, detailed to raise a federal regiment in Ohio. That freed Dennison to appoint Buckingham his adjutant general, and that put his military
staff in order, though he suffered politically for not having acted sooner.28

The most consistent theme of Dennison's war administra-
tion was his insistence that the federal government accept more Ohio troops. His reaction to the first call for 75,000 was to ask that Ohio be given a larger quota, offering to fill Kentucky's share when Governor Beriah Magoffin re-
fused. When the second call came in May, this time for 42,000, Dennison again complained that Ohio was not being asked for enough. He repeatedly pestered the Secretary of War for a larger quota, even going over Cameron's head and directly to Lincoln with his demands. The Ohio governor's methods did not endear him to Cameron or to the rest of the Cabinet, but it was clear to Dennison that the fate of the Union and of his party, not to mention his own political future, lay in vigorous prosecution of the war. From the time of Sumter, Dennison appears to have been resigned to war as the only solution. He also believed that a large army meant a shorter war. Above all, Dennison believed that a strong Union army would carry the war away from Ohio's borders and that was the best way to defend the state. By the end of his administration, Ohio had contributed 100,224 men to federal service in ninety regiments and over a score of independent batteries, squadrons, and companies.29
Dennison also understood from the start that the business of recruiting troops was a political matter, and more importantly, a local political matter. The first flush of volunteers was soon exhausted, and Dennison found it necessary to allot quotas to counties and municipalities. This was not a draft, but a call for volunteers. Here he counted upon civic pride to encourage volunteers, and it did just that. At first, Dennison relied upon the old regional militia structure to manage the local recruiting effort, tasking regional militia generals such as Lytle and Bates to raise regiments. But this system soon broke down as some local militia generals proved ineffective, some opposed the war, and some positions were vacant. Not a few incumbents resigned to enter the volunteer service themselves. Dennison hit upon the notion of appointing civilian military committees at the county and municipal levels and charging them to drum up recruits. It was an inspired idea. The alternative to filling a quota with volunteers was to endure a draft of the militia, something that was anathema to the mid-nineteenth century American. It insulted his sense of liberty, smacked of involuntary servitude, and sullied the civic pride of his neighbors and community. Dennison's understanding of this ideology lead to the formation of hardworking military committees of civic leaders with a stake in their community doing all that they
could to generate volunteers and avoid a shameful draft. They held rallies, made speeches, and enlisted the aid of churchmen, other leading citizens, town bands, and pretty girls. They raised money and paid enlistment bonuses. The organization of recruitment was one of the successes of Dennison's war administration and it continued to work after he left office.

In July, as the 90-day federal enlistments of the 1st and 2nd OVI were about to expire, Dennison learned that there were no federal paymasters in Ohio authorized to pay the men and process them out of the service. He hurried to Washington in person and mustered the "Ohio Gang," the sizable state Congressional delegation along with Chase from the Cabinet and some others, to plead his case. Lincoln invited the governor to a Cabinet meeting on this trip, renewing their acquaintance, and perhaps suppressing a chuckle at the stuffy patrician with the intent manner. But the President could not help but notice that Dennison got his way and that the proper officers were detailed. In addition, Dennison secured a commitment that the men would be paid from the time they entered state service on April 18, rather than from the time they entered federal service on April 30. Unfortunately, the soldiers had already returned to Ohio before the paymaster arrived and had dispersed to their homes complaining about an ungrateful
and incompetent government. These were veterans of Bull Run, the first of the volunteers, and men Dennison counted upon as leaders in the dozens of new regiments he was raising at the time. Now they were asked to make their own way to Columbus for their pay. In fact, most of these veterans did sign up for three more years that summer, but the incident was unfairly seen by Ohioans as one more fumble by the Dennison administration.31

As the initial rush of volunteers ebbed and the rate of enlistment slowed, another problem became apparent. The time between when the first man volunteered and when the regiment's rolls were filled was increasing. Federal rules did not permit men to be mustered into federal service until their regiment was full and all officers were appointed. So they generally milled about near home under the care of their military committee until the last man was recruited, with obvious chances for mischief, desertion, or worse. Dennison dispatched Wolcott, Swayne, and Swan to Washington where they energized the Ohio Gang and, armed with a remarkable letter, visited Lincoln, Cameron, and others. For once, Dennison had overcame the pseudo-aristocratic prissiness that so often crippled his rhetoric by addressing the letter to his three agents in the form of instructions. Dennison's letter was a clear, forceful, and persuasive document that treated a wideranging list of
complaints and offered reasonable suggestions about federal management of the war, and particularly about state/federal relations. The agents obviously showed the letter around in Washington, probably leaving copies in several places, since Scott, and perhaps Lincoln, referred to it in correspondence. One result was federal authority conferred upon Dennison and the other governors to muster men in squads and to appoint officers incrementally as strength built up, so that the men could be brought under discipline from the start. Appointment of a quartermaster at the beginning of recruitment of a regiment was also authorized, with authority to feed and clothe the men at federal expense as they enlisted. This change was instrumental in bringing order to recruiting. The lion's share of the credit should have been Dennison's. But, in the political climate of the time, it was not.

The great majority of troops for the Civil War were recruited through the states, and relatively few directly into the regular army or federal volunteer service. Yet at the start, governors had to contend with various enlistment poachers competing for volunteers within their borders. Even federal department commanders, such as Major General John C. Frémont at St. Louis, openly recruited or abetted recruiters in competition with state efforts. This was particularly annoying to Dennison since, as the most
populous western state, Ohio was fertile ground for poachers. Since Dennison's standing in public opinion was never high, and since it declined in the opening weeks of the war, there was a political element to the poaching as well. In September, U. S. Congressman John A. Gurley of Cincinnati complained in a letter to Lincoln that he was raising volunteers "authorized by General Frémont," had sent off "several companies," and would lose several more "since they will not have anything to do with Governor Dennison." One W. G. Sherwin was raising a regiment of artillerymen in Cincinnati, with the supposed blessing of Cameron, and without Dennison's authority. The governor knew Sherwin, and bristled when he learned of it, calling the notion of Sherwin as a military officer "a disgrace to the public service." He dashed off a telegram to the Secretary of War baring backbone under his Dennisonianism: "For God's sake withdraw his [Sherwin's] authority...I pray you issue no more such!" Cameron issued no more such.

The Wolcott, Swayne, and Swan mission, Dennison's instructions to them, and his success in raising troops, all combined to bring Cameron and his staff to the belated realization that they had more pressing matters to occupy them than Ohio recruiting. On September 10, War Office special orders were published directing all persons recruiting in Ohio to "immediately report to His Excellency
Governor Dennison at Columbus" and to operate under his control. Dennison was recognized as sole authority of Ohio recruiting. It was a clear victory for the governor, even squelching political enemies such as Gurley, though it was too late to change his political fortune.

The Stuff of War:

On the morning of April 24, his first full day as an Ohio general, McClellan inspected the new state armory in Columbus. He found a few boxes of rusted and broken smoothbore muskets, three honeycombed field guns, and "a confused pile of mildewed harnesses...not worth carrying away." He left grumbling to Cox who had accompanied him: "A fine stock of munitions on which to begin a great war!" The armory seemed to be doing its best service at the time by housing a mob of grousing volunteers. A bit more equipment was scattered about the state, some of it serviceable, but the fact remained that Ohio was woefully unprepared to outfit an army. Somewhere Dennison had to find thousands of rifles, dozens of guns, mountains of ammunition, carriages, caissons, wagons, horses, mules, cartridge boxes, belts, uniforms, food, and all the stuff of war. So did every other governor, North and South, and so did Cameron in Washington. As the efficiency of Dennison's military staff improved, contracts were let throughout the state for clothing, camp equipage, food, gun
carriages, and many other items that could be readily made locally or converted from civilian to military use. George B. Wright, the new man brought on as quartermaster general when Buckingham replaced Carrington, contracted with Cincinnati's leading iron products manufacturer, Miles Greenwood, to convert thousands of Springfield smooth-bore percussion muskets into rifles. This was done by re-boring them on a lathe, thus widening the bore. The "Greenwood Rifles" became favorites of Ohio regiments since their huge .69 caliber bullet could knock a charging foe down. There were few minor wounds inflicted by "Greenwoods." Greenwood went on to cast over two thousand guns of various sizes during the war, and to provide many other items of hardware for the Union. Even more significant to Ohio's war effort was a quaint establishment set up in Columbus called the State Laboratory. In fact, it was a state-run munitions plant, operated by Wright, turning out powder charges and cartridges. By the end of Dennison's administration, it had provided Ohio troops over 17,000 artillery rounds of various types, and over 2.5 million rounds of assorted small arms ammunition.37 But Ohio had no federal or private manufacturing arsenals, and in April Dennison faced an acute need for arms for his troops.

Once again he turned to agents, and once again to hardworking Christopher P. Wolcott. Wolcott was on his way
to New York to buy war supplies before the 1st and 2nd OVI left Columbus for Washington in mid-April. Along the way he helped McCook buy clothing and camp gear for them in Pennsylvania. The first useful bulk item he came across was a large store of tents and tentpoles, and he snapped them up knowing that prices were exploding as supplies of all kinds became increasingly scarce. Unfortunately, the first shipment of war goods from the East to arrive in Columbus was the tentpoles, consigned to Dennison. The governor's critics had their fun proclaiming that he had armed Ohio's finest with sticks. Wolcott quickly found about 2,500 new rifles and carbines in New York, though he had to pay stiff prices for them. He contracted with a Massachusetts agent to buy $100,000 worth of Enfield rifles in England for Ohio. Wolcott then visited Major General John E. Wool, at the time federal military department commander with jurisdiction over army activities east of the Mississippi, at his headquarters in New York and obtained an order to the Springfield Arsenal to ship 25,000 smooth-bore percussion muskets and 600,000 rounds of ammunition to Ohio. By the end of Dennison's administration, Wolcott had obtained 12,000 more new rifles and carbines, 30 most valuable six pound rifled artillery tubes, 44,000 pounds of powder, 800,000 cartridges, as well as sabers, scabbards and percussion caps. Wolcott also found time to visit
Washington on his own authority and solve a bureaucratic muddle. Federal customs agents insisted on collecting duties on arms and military supplies imported by the states, even as British, French, and Belgian arms dealers were jacking up their prices to take advantage of the bonanza from across the sea. Wolcott was close to Chase, having served in his administration in Columbus, and was able to persuade the Treasury Secretary and the Ohio Gang to obtain legislative and administrative relief for the states. Wolcott's quiet and effective service to the Union did not end with the Dennison administration. When his father-in-law Edwin M. Stanton replaced Cameron in January 1862, he called Wolcott to the War Department to be his principal assistant, where he became one of the hardest working men in town until his health failed. Exhausted and ill, Wolcott went home to Akron and died on April 4, 1863 at the age of 42.38

Another Dennison arms agent was James A. Garfield. At the outset of the war Illinois Governor Yates, with the concurrence of Washington, sent three regiments of Illinois state troops to secure the federal arsenal in St. Louis, Missouri. On the night of April 24, they spirited 21,000 small arms, 111,000 cartridges, and two guns across the river to Springfield. General Wool suggested that Yates might spare some of these for Ohio, and Dennison sent
Garfield with a request for 5,000 rifles. The future
president reveled in the assignment. "I must...go with..the
guns," he wrote, "lest some scamp should get them away."
Garfield got his 5,000 rifles and triumphantly delivered
them to Dennison. In due course he was rewarded with a
lieutenant colonel's commission in the 42nd OVI and there,
perhaps, he learned not to call his rifle his gun.39

When it came to managing money for the war, financier
Dennison was in his element, and did some of his best
service for his constituents and for the Union. The million
dollar bill and subsequent legislation put three million
dollars in his war chest. It was financed by six percent
bonds against the state's general credit, a handsome return
for the day. Municipalities and other local governments
subscribed to a large part of the issue, and banks
throughout the state seemed eager for all they could get.
Dennison realized that the bond subscription could be a
means of cementing popular support for the war effort, so
he shrewdly insured that the subscription rolls were open
to individuals and groups from throughout Ohio.40

In July, Congress passed legislation making the federal
government responsible for the costs of the war, and
authorizing the Treasury Secretary to reimburse the states
for the expenses of "enrolling, subsisting, clothing,
supplying, arming, equipping, paying, and transporting
troops...to suppress....the...insurrection..."

On August 6, Ohio was due $900,000, its first payment under the law. Dennison decided to spend this money in support of his war effort, but the state auditor ruled that it must be paid into the state treasury and re-appropriated by the legislature. Dennison did not doubt the legal soundness of the ruling, but the General Assembly had adjourned, and he was most reluctant to call a special session which, he was certain, would bring him more headaches than help. He cut a deal with Chase whereby the money was sent directly to him, and he spent it. At the end of his administration, Dennison submitted a detailed accounting of every dollar to the legislature and there was never so much as a murmur of censure from either lawmakers or the press.

Dennison and his administration did incur criticism from many quarters for the materiel supplied to Ohio troops. Officers wrote complaining of "shoddy pantaloons," McCook felt the heat over some of the clothing he and Wolcott bought for the Washington contingent, some regiments groused about the heavy and cumbersome Belgian rifles Wolcott scrounged up in the East, men in wool suffered as the weather turned warm, and often the beans were undercooked. But when his nine-month war administration was over, Dennison had put over 100,000 men in the field, armed, clothed, and supplied, having started from a bare
arsenal. He had spent more than three million dollars of state money, a great deal more of federal money, the state was solvent, state bond issues were funded, and there was $50,000 surplus in his current account.43

By the middle of his war governorship Dennison had succeeded in his most pressing task. He had raised the army Lincoln had asked of him, and more besides. He had overcome almost complete unpreparedness, a less than competent staff, confusion in the Federal government, and his own blunders, but he had prevailed. Yet he could not overcome the perception that he was somewhat inept, something of a dilettante, and generally flummoxed by his task. Politically, Dennison's pre-war stand to the center-right of the Republican ideological spectrum now appeared a liability to party insiders worried about the next election. But War Governor Dennison had many more challenges in 1861.
ENDNOTES

CHAPTER V


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CHAPTER VI
WAR GOVERNOR II: LEADING

There were more challenges than raising troops to confront Ohio's first Civil War governor, and in the face of these also, he demonstrated that there was boot under his polish. From the start of the war, William Dennison Jr. took an active role in Western regional affairs. He acted quickly to stop trade in war supplies to the South and to control the dissemination of vital war information over the telegraph. Dennison labored to build a common position among the governors of the Northwest, and to protect the region by securing the south bank of the Ohio River. He also became increasingly effective and successful in prodding the federal government into military action in the West.

Some historians have concluded that the Civil War marked a turning point in the relationship between the federal and state governments. Before the war, many Americans believed that sovereignty resided in the states, and that the national government was but a creation of convenience by the states. The experience of the war demonstrated to Americans that they were one nation, under one government.
and that the states were, in effect, political subdivisions. Americans said "the United States are" before the war, and "the United States is" after it. Such a construct concludes that during the Civil War, Northern state governors slowly lost control over military mobilization. More important, the governors lost influence over national policy direction and of the national Republican party to a shrewd and persistent Abraham Lincoln, a leader who had the vision to recognize that the time for a unified nation had arrived.\textsuperscript{1}

The governorship of William Dennison Jr. spanned only the first nine months of the conflict. This was the period one historian has called "the improvised war," a time of experimentation, expediency, uncertainty, and blunder on both sides.\textsuperscript{2} During this period it is doubtful that Dennison, or any other chief executive, state or national, had much spare energy to ponder transcendental themes. Dennison's central preoccupation was the defense of Ohio, at a time when he believed that his state was in imminent danger of invasion. But Dennison was not a unilateralist, and he was not a state supremacist. Dennison worked to persuade the federal government to defend Ohio and the West, and he worked to further Lincoln's policy as he understood it. Dennison was an active cooperationist within the Republican-Union movement, trying to harmonize state and
federal war efforts, although he was inclined to be testy with perceived incompetence. Dennison's reputation as war governor suffered in comparison to powerful neighboring chief executives such as Andrew G. Curtin of Pennsylvania, Richard Yates of Illinois, and Oliver P. Morton of Indiana, partly because of his "frittered in polish" image, but mostly because his war governorship was short and he was not reelected. But Dennison's failure of reelection had little to do with his conduct as war governor, conduct which was, in retrospect, exemplary.

Trade and Telegraph:

In the opening days of the Civil War, along with rumors of invasions and fifth columns came fears of spies and saboteurs. Dennison reacted by ordering all telegraph companies in the state not to transmit coded messages or orders for arms and munitions unless to or from the federal or loyal state governments, and not to transmit information on troop movements. This order was not particularly effective, as it proved much more difficult to implement than Dennison anticipated. It also brought him more censure. As might be expected, newsmen of all stripes bellowed in indignation. Troop movements were news, and newspaper readers were eager for it. Dennison's order caused such information to be deleted from news dispatches to and from Ohio, putting Ohio newspapers at a competitive disadvantage to those in other
states where such an order was not in force. Democratic editors charged violation of the Constitution, and border state editors railed against "Bill Dennison, who out Harrods Harrod in vainglory."3 Even Republican newsmen joined in the uproar, though there is evidence that at least some of them were more piqued that Dennison did not grant them favors or exemptions because of their party affiliation. This action, when combined with Dennison's general avoidance—even disdain—of working reporters, whom he perceived to be young, brash, and impolite, earned him bad press even from many Republican newspapers, and faint praise from most of the rest.4 It helps explain why many of Dennison's successes in office were reported as failures or were attributed to others.

A thornier problem in the opening weeks of the war was trade with the South. Lincoln proclaimed a blockade of the seceded states on April 19. Chase issued an implementing Treasury Department circular to his customs agents to stop "contraband" and "war supplies" to the Confederacy, but the definitions of these terms were fuzzy. Custom officials in Cincinnati at first took a narrow interpretation and were inclined to let items like foodstuffs and industrial goods through. Yet the majority sentiment in the Queen City was soon for stronger action. City police, as early as April 17, seized some arms shipments consigned to the South,
prompting retaliatory threats against Ohio goods at New Orleans. These seizures included shipments to Arkansas which, though a Southern state, had not yet seceded. Egged on by the Republican press, private citizens patrolled the docks looking for suspicious cargos. Dennison's initial reaction was to hew to the law and instruct Mayor Hatch not to interfere with trade to any state that had not seceded. In this he was primarily concerned for Kentucky because of his understanding of political sentiment there, and because of his appreciation of Lincoln's desire that nothing be done to provoke Kentucky to secede. But the governor did not count on the reaction of Cincinnatians. Republican newspapers such as the Gazette railed against his decision and indignation meetings were called during which local leaders denounced all trade with Southern states, arguing that those that had not seceded were but transit points for those that had.  

Dennison was in a quandary. Public sentiment in Cincinnati mirrored his own, since he too believed that the border states were willing agents of the Confederacy, but he was sensitive to political developments in Kentucky and to Lincoln's policy. By April 28, the actions of Virginia in interfering with the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad prompted Dennison to alter his stance. He peremptorily ordered all express companies doing business in the state not to
ship any arms, munitions, or contraband outside Ohio without his prior permission, and forbade all railroads to ship such material to "Virginia or any seceded state" without his approval. This was a clever political response on Dennison's part. It appeared to give in to hardliners in Cincinnati and other parts of the state who wanted to end all trade with the Confederacy and its sympathizers, although it allowed some political enemies to boast that they had backed Dennison down. In fact, it sustained trade with Kentucky, thus supporting Lincoln's policy. It also aided Unionist sentiment in northwestern Virginia, mainly in Wheeling, where it demonstrated that he was willing to get tough with Richmond. But trade was only part of a broader initiative towards Ohio's southern border states that Dennison pursued during his administration.

Kentucky:

Very early in the war, on April 18, Dennison attempted a rapprochement with Kentucky, aimed at protecting Ohio's southern border and keeping Kentucky in the Union. He selected State Senator Thomas M. Key as his agent for a mission to Kentucky Governor Bariah Magoffin. Key was the Cincinnati Democrat who tangled with Garfield over treason and Ohio's first war appropriation. He was a Kentucky native who retained many family and business ties there, and Dennison expected that he could gain access to Magoffin.
Key did, relaying Dennison's hope that the two states could continue friendly relations while insisting that Ohio was "devoted to the support of the Constitution and laws of the United States, and to the maintenance of whatever policy should be determined upon by the General Government." Dennison was offering friendship, but no concessions other than the absence of a threat to invade Kentucky.

But over the next several weeks Magoffin equivocated. Described by one biographer as "idealistic almost to the point of foolishness," the Kentucky governor struggled to maintain his state's neutrality in the face of a deeply divided citizenry and agents provocateur from both camps. He endorsed Confederate recruiting in Kentucky, then banned it. He welcomed agents of the Confederacy, but refused to mount artillery along the Ohio or Mississippi, lest it be provocative. Dennison, however, came into possession of what he believed to be dispatches between Magoffin and contacts in Louisiana by which $200,000 worth of arms were transferred to the rebels, and he took these as proof of Magoffin's treachery. As Magoffin learned of increasing anti-Confederate sentiment in Cincinnati, and of Kentucky citizens forming Union regiments in Ohio, he became more alarmed. On April 25 he asked for a meeting with Dennison and Republican Governor Oliver Morton of Indiana to discuss a joint initiative to Washington to mediate between the
Union and the Confederacy. Neither Morton nor Dennison wanted anything to do with such a proposal, holding that it was the South's duty to return to the Union, and Dennison was by now thoroughly soured on Magoffin. But Dennison suggested that to refuse a meeting might drive the wavering Magoffin to the Confederates so they accepted, setting April 30 as the date and Cincinnati as the place. The two Northern governors arrived early to compare notes and hatch a joint position, but Magoffin stood them up, sending a stand-in instead. When Morton and Dennison refused to deal with his agent, Magoffin hurried to Cincinnati to patch things up but arrived too late. The others had left for Indiana to review Hoosier troops, convinced of Magoffin's duplicity and of his Confederate sympathy.9

Before May ended, Magoffin issued a formal declaration of Kentucky neutrality. In reply Dennison and Morton called for a preemptive Union occupation of parts of Kentucky, ostensibly to protect Kentucky Unionists, but in fact to secure that tortured state for the North. Lincoln withheld his response until the Confederates forced his hand, recognizing that a neutral Kentucky was not a Confederate Kentucky. Torn through the summer by internecine strife, with agents from both sides recruiting soldiers and hatching plots, Kentucky drifted inexorably into chaos while an increasingly ineffective and jittery Magoffin clung to his
doomed neutrality. On September 3 Confederate forces under Major General Leonidas Polk invaded from Tennessee and an unknown brigadier general named Ulysses S. Grant led the Union's response by occupying Paducah. Dennison had tried his hand at peacemaking, but he was bound by his ideological convictions and his loyalty to Lincoln to be inflexible. He also tried his hand more successfully at building a coalition of Western governors.

The Cleveland Conference:

By the end of April Dennison had become concerned about the conduct of the war. The continued interruption of communications with Washington due to unrest in Baltimore, exacerbated by disruption of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and the adjacent telegraph, were one source of worry, but Dennison now suspected indecision and blunder on the part of the Cabinet and the War Department. The huge buildup of militiamen around Washington must surely have rendered the capital safe; now it was time to secure the safety of the West. Press reports and private intelligence from western Virginia and Kentucky alarmed Dennison. He also knew that the other Western governors were in like situations, and probably of like mind. Illinois Governor Richard Yates was concerned about slave states on two borders, about domestic unrest in his southern counties, and for the defense of Cairo. Morton was arming local
militia companies along the Ohio River in addition to raising regiments in answer to Lincoln's call. Governor Andrew Curtin of Pennsylvania was raising a force larger than Dennison's, and faced threats from both the southeast and the southwest. Most of all, Dennison was determined that the Union must take the offensive to push the war away from the North's borders, and he feared that Washington was equivocating. He resolved to call a conference of Western governors at Cleveland on May 3, and invited his counterparts from Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and New York. Curtin and Morton showed up, along with Austin Blair of Michigan and Alexander Randall of Wisconsin. Yates and New York's E. D. Morgan sent representatives. Dennison rolled into town with an entourage. Swan and Swayne came along as political gurus, and he managed to pry McClellan out of Cincinnati for the occasion.11

Dennison was the main speaker at the private meeting that afternoon. He presented his evidence that Magoffin of Kentucky was selling arms to Louisiana and voiced his concern that the border states were springboards for an imminent invasion of the Northwest. He shared his worry that the administration in Washington was in disarray, complaining that he had heard nothing in reply to his requests for the federals' plan of action or to his urgings
that an offensive be undertaken immediately. He complained that the federal government's enforcement of the President's embargo of the South was lukewarm and urged his colleagues to issue trade edicts like his so that Ohio merchants were not disadvantaged by Southern trade shifting to other Northern border towns. Advising his fellow governors, "we must defend ourselves if we are not defended," he insisted on an invasion of Kentucky and western Virginia to establish a defensive cordon for the Ohio River valley. Yet Dennison did not advocate unilateral action by the Western governors. On the contrary, he cautioned against it except as a last resort, calling his colleagues' attention to their roles as national leaders. With the line "it is very dangerous to teach any fragment of a nation that it is capable of taking care of itself," he pledged his loyalty to Lincoln and the Union while affirming that their task was to persuade the federals to act in the West. He proposed that they send a delegation to Washington to advocate a larger army, sounder organization, better management, and a unified federal military department in the West with McClellan as its commander, directed to take the offensive as soon as possible.

Dennison's presentation met with little discussion and resounding unanimity. The governors went on to deliver
stem-winder war speeches to a partisan crowd in Cleveland that evening, and McClellan joined in with appropriate, though more subdued, remarks. Randall was chosen as the group's delegate to Washington where he presented his message to Lincoln on May 6. Dennison sent Swan and Swayne along with a letter of introduction to Lincoln saying that they represented his views. One of them pointedly asked Lincoln if it would be Ohio or the federal government that must act if the state were invaded by Virginia or Kentucky. Lincoln's secretary, who recorded the question in his diary, unfortunately did not note the name of the Ohioan who asked it nor the President's reply. In any event, Swan and Swayne telegraphed Dennison on May 8 that "the policy of the governors at Cleveland was adopted." Did this Western governors' conference cause Lincoln to step up the war in the West? The President's second call for troops, and his decision that they be three-year men, was dated May 3, the day the conference met. McClellan was also appointed commander of a new military department responsible for the Ohio Valley on May 3, though he wrote Scott on May 7 that he had just learned of his appointment from an aide and had not yet been officially notified. McClellan did not feel that he had enough authority to issue a general order assuming command of his new department until May 13. How much the governor's conference influenced all this is
debateable. The orders and proclamations issued in Washington may have been backdated to save face, or may simply have been delayed by the overworked clerks and the chaotic mails of the day. As some historians have suggested, Lincoln may have acted to forestall a move by the Western governors to usurp his authority; yet, in the muddle of war, the events could have been coincidences or the result of parallel thinking. But Ohio's gentleman governor had been the instigator, and the federals took notice.

Western Virginia:

No event of Dennison's governorship was more significant than his role in western Virginia in April and May, 1861. In response to Lincoln's election in November and to South Carolina's secession on December 20, 1860, Virginians met in convention and passed an ordinance of secession on February 17, 1861, contingent upon a popular vote on May 23. Having voted almost unanimously against secession, the state's western politicians walked out, led by State Senator John S. Carlile of Clarksburg. Western Virginians' economic interests were becoming increasingly tied to east-west trade along the new Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Chronic disputes over taxation and distribution of state revenues fanned Virginia sectionalism as well. There was also a class element to the schism, since many western
Virginians proudly saw themselves as "plain folk" and characterized most eastern Virginians as patricians. Carlile and other disaffected Westerners convened a rump counter-convention in Wheeling on May 13, and emotions ran high. Most western Virginians probably supported the Union, though they were lukewarm about Lincoln. At least a sizable minority were militantly for the Confederacy, and some were for the Old Dominion wherever she might lead. The members of the Wheeling Convention equivocated and agonized over a proposal to break from Richmond and set up a new pro-Union state. Some were concerned about historical ties, some with the legality of dividing a state, and many for their necks. In the end they decided to postpone action until after the May 23 referendum, and appointed a central committee chaired by Carlile and charged with recalling the convention "in case of emergency." With that, they scurried home.17

Virginia was in turmoil. Pro-Unionists in the northwest, egged on by the Wheeling Intelligencer and its publisher Archibald Campbell, called for "revolution now!" Campbell went on: "let history record...that there was one green spot--one Swiss canton--one Scottish highland--one province of Vendée, where unyielding patriotism rallied..."18 But Carlile and some others rallied to Washington, appealed to Lincoln, and came away with instructions to the War
Department to ship 2000 rifles to Wheeling and to recruit a regiment of federal volunteers there for the defense of the loyalists. Partisans from each side squared off in Parkersburg on April 17 in an armed riot over control of two state cannon stored in the county jail. In Richmond, Governor Letcher and his supporters behaved as if separation from the Union had already been approved by the voters. Harper's Ferry was occupied on April 17 by Virginia militia loyal to Letcher, temporarily blocking the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and carting off the machinery from the federal arsenal to Richmond. Other state forces occupied the Grosport and Norfolk Navy Yards on April 21. Letcher's order to the mayor of Wheeling to seize federal property there, however, brought the indignant snort that it had been seized in the name of Lincoln and the United States. On May 7, the Letcher government formally joined the Confederacy, though the referendum was three weeks away. Citizens found it increasingly difficult to remain neutral, as the national tragedy manifested itself in towns, villages, and farms. Families divided, friendships sundered, and ordinary folk went about armed.19

Dennison's reaction was twofold. As ever, his first concern was the defense of Ohio. Citizens in Marietta wrote of their alarm over events across the river in Parkersburg. Ohioans in all of the border counties were concerned, and
wrote asking for state arms, for help forming local
defensive companies, and for troops. Ohio's militia organ-
ization at the start of the war boasted of only one ready-
to-march battery of artillery, based in Cleveland. Though
grandiosely called a regiment, it had only half a dozen
six-pounders, but they were sound pieces with carriages,
caissons, and well-drilled volunteer crews. Significantly,
Dennison withheld them from both the defense of Washington
and from McClellan at Camp Dennison, keeping them under his
personal control as long as he perceived an imminent threat
to the state. He directed them to Marietta on April 20
under state orders in response to unrest in Parkersburg.
Carrington busied himself persuading a Columbus foundry to
fire up and cast shot for the battery that weekend, and
enlisted the ladies of several Columbus churches to hur-
rriedly stitch powder bags for the charges. To further
strengthen Ohio's defenses, the state regiments Dennison
raised over and above the call of the President were
deployed to fairgrounds about the state within an easy
march of a railroad, and some to improvised camps an hour
or two's march inland from Ohio River towns like Marietta
and Belpre. From such positions they could quickly react to
trouble but were not visible from across the river.20
Here again, Dennison withheld these troops from McClellan
and kept them under his personal control.
Dennison's second reaction to domestic unrest in western Virginia was to actively abet the Unionists in Wheeling. In this he differed markedly from his policy towards Kentucky. Consistently since the Virginia conven- tion in February, Dennison was hostile to Richmond and sympathetic to western Virginia Unionists. He was in communication with Carlile, Campbell, and others in the Union camp in April and May, offering Ohio's support. Newspaper accounts on both sides of the river at the time credit Dennison and Curtin of Pennsylvania with promising their state troops if necessary for the protection of the Wheeling Unionists against the Letcher government, and the Intelligencer's man in Columbus telegraphed Campbell on May 13 that Dennison would furnish money for the Wheeling cause. This, added to the Cleveland governor's conference, led Ohio Democratic newspaper publisher Samuel Medary to rant that the war was "a conspiracy of the governors." Dennison also sent hardworking Christopher P. Wolcott on a covert mission to Wheeling on May 15 to gauge political sentiment at the Unionist convention. Wolcott, well known in his own right, was in and out of town, having met with the key Unionists, without his name appearing in either Unionist or Secessionist newspapers, no mean feat. Wolcott was not impressed by Carlile, Campbell, and company. He returned to Columbus late on May 16 to report "western Virginia is not
to be trusted," suggesting that the Unionists were timid and vacillating.22 If Dennison had been planning more active intervention on the side of the Wheeling Unionists, Wolcott's report dissuaded him. The Virginia referendum was held as scheduled on May 23 and, though twenty-four of the thirty-five counties of north-western Virginia gave substantial majorities to the Union, the state-wide returns were for secession.23 In fact, by then the issue was moot and Dennison had decided that the only solution was a military one.

On May 14, Dennison was meeting in Cincinnati with McClellan, Wolcott, Swan, Swayne, and some of McClellan's staff, when a telegram arrived from Chase informing the governor that McClellan had been appointed a major general in the regular army. McClellan reacted suitably for the occasion, although he may have already been surreptitiously notified by others, but his reserved manner served to underline the increasing distance between the general and the governor. Dennison had worked hard for McClellan's appointments, first as state major general, then as federal department commander, now as federal major general, always with the aim of prompting Washington to take the offensive in the West. Dennison was annoyed that his insistence on offensive action seemed to be ignored by the War Department and that he had no clear idea of the federal government's
plans for the West. The governor now pressed McClellan for a move into western Virginia to stiffen the Unionists, protect the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, and defend Ohio. But McClellan chose delay, claiming that there was no immediate threat from Virginia and that he needed more time to train his men. While still somewhat deferential to the Ohio governor, and careful not to break with him, McClellan had decided that he had bigger fish to fry and need not do Dennison's bidding. His concerns were with his own intelligence reports, with the readiness of his troops at Camp Dennison, and with General-in-Chief Scott.

McClellan had sent Lt. Orlando M. Poe on a reconnaissance of the Ohio River border towns, including Wheeling, in early May, and Poe reported relative calm and strong Union sentiment from Wheeling to Parkersburg, but also noted that the population south of the river from Parkersburg to the Kentucky line was "rotten." He also recommended and McClellan agreed that a demonstration by Union troops along the river at that time would be "injudicious." Right or wrong, this judgment did not square with Dennison's appreciation of the situation. McClellan had also been in correspondence with Scott from April 23, the very day that Dennison had first appointed him an Ohio general and, unlike Dennison, McClellan did know Scott's master plan for the West. Scott directed McClellan on May 3
and again on May 21 and 22 to drill his three-year troops through the hot summer months in preparation for an offensive down the Mississippi in the fall, and to use three-month men if necessary to fend off the Confederates in the meantime, unless they appeared in force. In early May, the reorganization fiasco over three-month and three-year men at Camp Dennison was in full force, and McClellan was unsure of the temper or mettle of those troops. All of these influences, his innate conservatism, and the fact that his new position as a federal officer placed him outside Dennison's jurisdiction, combined to cause McClellan to resist Dennison's insistence on an offensive, unless clearer threat became evident.

On May 19 and 20, reports reached both Dennison and McClellan that a force of Virginia Confederates had occupied Grafton, about fifty miles south-southeast of Wheeling, and had seized the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad junction there. For Dennison, this was the firebell. He hurriedly arranged a meeting with Morton and Yates in Indianapolis for May 23, and peremptorily summoned McClellan to attend, no doubt prepared to carry his demand for action directly to Lincoln if he met equivocation. But this time he found the general ready to act, having received a message from Scott on May 23 directing him to counteract the Confederate advance on Grafton. It could not
have been lost upon McClellan that Dennison was at least partially, and perhaps in large part, behind that message. He would have been right. Dennison had gone over the general's head and telegraphed Scott directly on May 20 warning of a Confederate threat to Grafton and insisting on an immediate federal response. He had been prompted by a telegram from Carlile the same day. In Indianapolis, Dennison huddled with Morton and Yates and they issued a joint statement calling upon the federals to cross the Ohio now. In Washington, an aging Scott felt the pressure. He added western Virginia and parts of western Pennsylvania to McClellan's department, thereby clearing any legal obstacles to his operations there, and directed McClellan to counter the thrust on Grafton, though he complained to Lincoln that this was against his overall plan for the West. Clearly, the General-in-Chief had acted in response to political pressure from the Western governors, led by Dennison. On May 25, Colonel George Porterfield, commanding the Confederate force in Grafton, ordered bridges on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad between Grafton, Wheeling, and Parkersburg burned in fear of a Union advance over those routes, and that was McClellan's firebell. On May 26, he informed Dennison that he had chosen a two-prong advance, one southward from Wheeling led by the Virginia Union regiment there, and another from Marietta across the river
to Parkersburg and southeast from that point, with both columns to converge at Grafton. McClellan was still reluctant to use his three-year men from Camp Dennison. He asked the governor for state troops, including the battery at Marietta, and a much relieved Dennison promptly assented, his reason for holding them back now gone. Carrington issued movement orders that night bringing the state regiments up to the river and placing them under McClellan's command. McClellan ordered them across.  

On May 27, two Ohio state regiments occupied Parkersburg, two more joined the Virginia Union regiment at Wheeling, and two more followed in reserve. The march on Grafton was completed without difficulty, with a skirmish ensuing ten miles south of town at Phillipi on June 3 which routed Porterfield's badly outnumbered rebels. McClellan arrived on June 21 to lead a smart little campaign that cleared western Virginia of organized Confederate troops and established the security behind which the Unionists met in Wheeling on June 11 and again on August 6, leading eventually to the formation of the new state of West Virginia. The Young Napoleon then went on to Washington, leaving the war in the West for bigger things.  

Dennison now had his defensive line in the Virginia hills well south of Ohio's borders. He had not, as some suggested at the time, invaded Virginia on his own hook. Dennison was
insistent that Virginia be invaded, but also that the
federal government should do so. Dennison did, however,
prompt the invasion, and used his political clout and that
of his fellow governors to prod a reluctant federal
establishment to act.

Politics:

In November, Brigadier General Don Carlos Buell,
McClellan's successor commanding the Department of the
Ohio, wrote to the Young Napoleon in Washington complaining
of "our officious governor" who "evidently looks upon all
Ohio troops as his army." He added, "I shall stop all this
sort of thing."28 The Confederates soon gave Buell a bit
more to worry about however, and he never did stop all that
sort of thing. Dennison continued to move state regiments
not yet released to federal service to Ohio's borders when­
ever he heard rumors of a Confederate soldier within a day
or two's march of the river. He continued to send state
agents to visit Ohio regiments wherever they were, in­
quiring into their welfare, inspecting hospitals, and
generally getting under the skin of their federal command­
ers. He also continued to dash off insistent, even alarm­
ist, telegrams to the War Department whenever he learned of
a Confederate column anywhere in Kentucky or western
Virginia. Dennison also quarreled with officers of the
federal logistics services, complaining of late payments,
inadequate supplies, and what he generally regarded as inefficiency and incompetence. As the weather turned cold in the fall, he appealed to the Ohio people for blankets, gloves, winter underwear, and socks for Ohio troops, claiming that the federals could not provide adequately for the men. None of these activities endeared the gentleman governor to the federal military establishment. When, after he had failed re-nomination as governor, Dennison applied to Lincoln for a commission as a general, he found that General-in-Chief McClellan held a de facto veto on such appointments. The Young Napoleon ignored past services and took his revenge. Dennison was never commissioned in any capacity in the federal military service.  

Another testy relationship was that between Chase and Dennison. In due course, Lincoln would break with his ambitious and cunning Treasury Secretary and shuffle him off to the Supreme Court, from where he would eventually flirt with the Democrats and his influence in Ohio would wane. But in 1861, Chase was "Mr. Ohio" in Washington, tacit head of the Ohio Gang, and Ohio's man in the Cabinet. In that capacity Chase and Dennison cooperated mightily in the pressing practical matters of fielding troops. The two were in constant communication, and there is a hint in Coggeshall's diary that they may have corresponded in code, though no "ciphers" as he called them appear in the papers
of Dennison, Chase, or Coggeshall. The word may refer only to telegrams, since these were sometimes called ciphers at the time. Dennison asked Chase to intercede with Cameron at the War Department, and Chase was eager to be the source of news from Washington to Dennison and Ohio. But the two never reconciled their break over the 1860 national convention, and the "moral bull-bitch" never let pass an opportunity to stab Dennison politically. On May 16 he wrote to Lincoln: "You will regret your contemplated appointment" of Dennison to "so high an office." He must have had second thoughts about their relative standings in Lincoln's eyes, however, since he wrote again on May 18 that he had not intended "to question your judgment" and hoped that Dennison "works out if you appoint him." Unfortunately, it is not clear what high office Lincoln had in mind for Dennison in mid-May 1861, but he was not appointed. Only after Chase had left the Cabinet did Lincoln tap Dennison for a job in Washington. Chase also worked behind Dennison's back to undermine him with others, writing to McClellan in July asking if the governor had interfered with the general's control of troops. McClellan passed up the opportunity and said no. For his part, there is no record of Dennison disparaging Chase in correspondence, but he confided to Coggeshall that he knew Chase had opposed him for the Senate and perhaps in other ways as well. They
worked together as their duty demanded, but the personal relationship between the two powerful Ohio politicians remained strained throughout the Dennison administration, and Dennison received no political support from Chase.32

The Union Party of Ohio met in convention in Columbus on September 5, 1861. From press accounts, it is not clear if Dennison attended the convention, nor if anyone present even mentioned their incumbent governor. War Democrat David Tod was nominated by acclamation to replace him. It appears that even before the gavel came down to open the convention, it was a done deal. Well before the General Assembly adjourned in May, it was clear to Ohio Republicans that they would not win the fall elections. Dennison was unpopular. The pompous prose of his inaugural address and his tendency towards pretentiousness had amused many and offended some. His equivocation over trade with Kentucky angered both sides. His interference with telegraph service antagonized the press. The several comic opera muck-ups at the start of his administration overshadowed his subsequent solid successes. His patrician refusal to explain his difficulties in public meant that Ohioans were seldom challenged in their assumption of gubernatorial bumbling. A churlish press, piqued by his aloofness, made much of trivial discomfitures and did not provide Ohioans the explanations of Dennison's actions that they might have had for a
more congenial chief executive. To the more radical wing of
the Republican Party, Dennison's sometimes confrontational
attitude towards the War Department and federal commanders
marked him as a poor team player. But, in a broader sense,
Dennison was not the issue. As fractured and tortured as
the Democrats were, a few stalwarts, notably Samuel Medary
through his widely influential one-man Columbus newspaper
the Crisis, had made inroads in the public's early solidar­
ity for the Union. Many Ohioans were alarmed by the action
of Union generals Benjamin F. Butler and John C. Frémont to
declare some slaves free, and by the first Confiscation Act
of the Republican Congress in August, which freed slaves
employed in arms or labor against the United States. The
old fears of free black labor and of lawless black people
running loose in the streets were heard again in Ohio. Some
Ohioans were alarmed that the Tenth Amendment to the
Constitution was being violated by the acts of the Lincoln
administration to impose its will upon the sovereign states
of the South. As a result, Ohio Republicans had decided by
early summer that they must compromise with the War
Democrats and forge a coalition based upon the central
theme of preserving the Union and dropping the slavery
issue. The outcome was the Union Party within which the
more radical Republicans of the Cleveland wing had to lower
their profile.33 It is doubtful that Dennison, with his
shift to the radicals during his gubernatorial campaign, could have been renominated by such a party even if his governorship had been popular.

After the convention, Dennison travelled to Washington at least twice between September and November, looking for a general's commission. He seems to have expected to become a major general managing the federal logistics system, where he confided to Coggeshall that he could "make straight many things." He came home to Columbus clearly deflated, suggesting to intimates that he might be in the running for a single star, but that he had "left with McClellan entirely the question of his appointment as a brigadier general." In truth, he had been shuffled out of town with his dignity rumpled. At Christmas time, rumors were rife that Dennison would be named Minister to Russia, much to his delight and that of his wife Anne as well, but Lincoln chose instead to use the job as a way of ridding the War Department of Cameron. Dennison went on to deliver a graceful and statesmanlike parting speech to the legislature in January, much of it probably penned by Coggeshall, in which he offered the first and only public explanation of his actions as governor.

As he left the State House that cold morning, Dennison was once again a private citizen. If he was bitter towards the state Republicans who had ousted him and resentful of
Washington insiders who had spurned him, he kept his own counsel. Dennison was resolved to continue in the war effort any way he could. He had been the only governor he could have been: proud, honest, patrician, ideological, totally dedicated to his vision of the public trust, belatedly forceful, and, in retrospect, successful.
ENDNOTES

CHAPTER VI


3Wheeling Daily Union, May 21, 1861.

4Ohio, Executive Documents, 1861 (Columbus: Richard Nevins, State Printer, 1862), Pt. 1, 366, 399-401; Columbus Crisis, April 18, 1861; Wheeling Daily Union, April 16, 1861; Wheeling Intelligencer, May 22, 1861, James G. Smart, A Radical View: The "Agate" Dispatches of Whitelaw Reid, 1861-1865 (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1976), 14; Akron Beacon Journal, June 20, 1861; Whitelaw Reid, Ohio in the War (Cincinnati: The Robert Clarke Company, 1895), Vol. I, 41-42; H. B. Carrington to E. A. Randall, October, 1911, Henry B. Carrington Papers, The Ohio Historical Society.

5War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899) Ser. III, Vol. I, 89-90; Ohio, Executive Documents, 1861, Pt. 1, 399-402, 412; E. Merton Coulter, "Effects of Secession Upon the Commerce of the Mississippi Valley," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, Dec. 1916, 275-300; Wheeling Daily Union, April 17, 1861; Wheeling Intelligencer, April 17, 1861; Ohio State Journal, April 19, 27, 1861; Lancaster Gazette, April 21, 1861; Perking, 877; Reid, Ohio in the War, 41; Capital City Fact, May 1, 1861; Tucker, "Cincinnati in the Civil War," Publications of the Ohio Civil War Centennial Commission, No. 9 (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1962), 17-19; McPherson, Battle

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15 *Coggleshall Diary*, May 8, 1861.


18 *Wheeling Intelligencer*, May 15, 1861.


21 *The Crisis*, April 18, 1861.

22 *Coggeshall Diary*, May 16, 1861.


30 S. P. Chase to A. Lincoln, May 16, 1861, Chase Papers.

31 S. P. Chase to A. Lincoln, May 18, 1861, ibid.


33 Reid, Ohio in the War, 53-61; Clement M. Silvestro, "Samuel Medary" (Thesis, The University of Wisconsin, 1951), 130-135; Eric J. Cardinal, "The Democratic Party in Ohio and the Civil War: An Analysis of a Wartime Political Minority" (Ph.D. Diss. Kent State University, 1981), 88-95; John R. McKivigan, "The Democracy of Columbus, Ohio During the Civil War" (Thesis, The Ohio State University, 1973), 24-33; Hesseltine, War Governors, 9, 26, and 237; Ryan, History of Ohio, 170; Samuel R. Kamm, "The Civil War Career of Thomas A. Scott" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1940), 88-89; Eugene H. Roseboom, The Civil War Era: 1850-1873 (Columbus: The Ohio Historical Society, 1944), 388, 391; Ohio State Journal, 6 and 7 September, 1861; Crisis, Columbus, Ohio, 7 September 1861; Coggeshall Diary, August 27, September 5, and 7, October 6, 1861.

34 Coggeshall Diary, October 9, 1861.

35 Coggeshall Diary, November 22, 1861.

36 Coggeshall Diary, December 5, 6, 10, and 27, 1861; Ohio, Executive Documents, 1861, Pt. 1, 331-373; Akron Beacon Journal, December 26, 1861.
CHAPTER VII
IN THE WINGS

When Ex-Governor William Dennison Jr. returned to private life in January 1862, Columbus was a changed town. A substantial military post named Camp Chase sprawled on the northwestern edge of the city, housing Confederate prisoners and state troops in training or in transit. At Goodale Park, Camp Jackson had been closed after complaints from the good people of the neighborhood about the rowdiness of its inhabitants. The permanent population of Columbus had grown only modestly from 17,822 to 18,554 during the financial hard times of the 1850s, but in early 1862 it bustled with the business of war. Men in uniform were everywhere. New manufacturing establishments flourished to supply the war effort, providing employment for hundreds of old and new residents, including many women, who were no doubt thankful for the income since their menfolk were away at war. The city council had decided to crack down on free-roaming hogs rooting in the streets, and in August over one hundred were rounded up and impounded. The main streets were re-covered with crushed stone, raising clouds of dust and complaints from residents. Near
Camp Chase, idle soldiers out for fun ruined an old black man's fruit stand, while in the better parts of town good citizens were irate that some Confederates imprisoned there retained their slaves as personal servants.\(^1\)

The mood in Ohio was somber as the new year dawned. News of the federal disaster at Bull Run the previous July had shaken many, and prompted Governor Dennison to proclaim to Ohioans in his inimitable prose: "I conjure you to give no heed to any proposition, under whatsoever sanction it may come, for negotiation or compromise with armed rebellion."\(^2\) The success of George B. McClellan's campaign in western Virginia, particularly the prominent role played by Ohio troops there, had restored hope, and the Young Napoleon's subsequent call by President Lincoln to lead the federal armies heartened many. But the ensuing long months of inactivity without a decisive engagement in the East fostered more anxiety. In February 1862, news of federal victories at Fort Henry and Fort Donelson in Tennessee by an obscure general named Ulysses S. Grant broke the spell. Celebrations erupted all over town.\(^3\) No doubt the lethargy in Washington would be broken now that brave Western lads had shown the effete Easterners what winning was about!

Private citizen William Dennison Jr. was at loose ends. He would return to the world of corporate law, and he would
tend to his private affairs that had been somewhat neglected while he was war governor. But his return to the private sector would be halfharted. The nation was torn by a great civil war and he wanted a role in it. His overtures to President Lincoln for a job in Washington had been blocked by jealousies and hostilities from before and during his governorship. Dennison had confided to intimates as early as October 1861 that he thought it would be a long war, and that he was concerned about mismanagement in the federal establishment. He was ambitious for a chance to confront that mismanagement from a high position within government, but he had been denied. Yet Dennison was, above all, a politician. He held strong Republican views, and he knew that his political future was tied to that of Lincoln and the Republicans. He had no doubt that he must continue to serve, to further his convictions and those of his party in whatever role he could find. He did not particularly like his successor as Governor of Ohio, War Democrat David Tod, and labeled him "a weak man, moved from mean[ness], not a thinker, not an Executive, not a reflecting man." But Tod was the Union Party man, and the Republicans had spearheaded the Union movement. Determined to remain involved in government affairs and in the war effort, Dennison offered his services to the new governor in whatever capacity he might require, and Tod took him up on it.
He made the same offer to Lincoln, a man he held in much higher regard.

With McClellan in Virginia:

George Brinton McClellan rode into Washington in July 1861, the man of the hour. In bright contrast to the disaster at Bull Run, his victories in West Virginia, his youth, his vitality, and his confident manner made him appear a godsend to the frazzled and fearful of the nation's capital. He quickly replaced his aged mentor, General-in-Chief Winfield Scott, and set about building a magnificent federal army of over 100,000 men, the best equipped and best trained the nation had ever known. But by the new year, enthusiasm for the Young Napoleon was fading. His insistence upon thorough and lengthy training of his army and for an extensive logistics tail, methodically prepared, was now interpreted as indecision and dawdling. After all, with Richmond only 90 miles away and the new Army of the Potomac the largest and finest on the continent, why not march down and end the rebellion now? McClellan added to the poisonous atmosphere with his air of smug self-confidence and outright disdain for President Lincoln, whom he privately labeled a "well meaning baboon." This, along with his contempt for the members of the Cabinet and his distrust of politicians in general, led McClellan to keep his operational plans secret from
Lincoln just as he had from Dennison in Ohio. In late January, an exasperated President took the extraordinary step of publicly ordering McClellan to take the offensive against the Rebels and to give him a deadline for doing so. McClellan planned a spring campaign on the Virginia peninsula between the James and York rivers with the objective of capturing the Confederate capital at Richmond, but he believed it necessary to first secure the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad around Harper's Ferry and to strengthen his deployments south of Washington near last summer's battlefield at Manassas, Virginia. Logistics, engineering, and weather difficulties slowed these operations, even though the Confederates withdrew quickly before the Union advances, leaving some of their field gear behind. Slowness bringing the enemy to battle prompted Lincoln to relieve McClellan of his position as General-in-Chief in early March—Lincoln demoted McClellan to commander of the Army of the Potomac. The President further signaled his annoyance by ordering, against McClellan's advice, a reorganization of the Army of the Potomac into corps and selecting the corps commanders, thereby further reducing McClellan's authority. Lincoln had acted upon the political advice of his Cabinet and of members of Congress, ostensibly to free McClellan so he could concentrate on his advance to Richmond. But, in truth, the Young Napoleon's star was dimming.6
It is not clear why Dennison was in Washington early that March. Perhaps he was summoned, perhaps he was again casting about for a federal appointment. William T. Coggeshall, Dennison's former aide who was still close, wrote in his diary on March 14, "Dennison gone to Washington on account of McClellan," indicating that the ex-governor had McClellan's difficulties in mind when he left Columbus. It is clear that Dennison met President Lincoln on the 10th or 11th and learned of McClellan's demotion before the general did. Later, Dennison confided to Coggeshall that he had "resisted the clamor against McClellan, though he was chagrined" at the general's performance. McClellan was at his field headquarters at Fairfax Court House, Virginia on the 11th and 12th. Dennison telegraphed on the 11th advising him to come to Lincoln immediately to explain himself and to have his staff send copies of all his correspondence to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and the President. Clearly, Dennison was warning McClellan of the Administration's pique at the general's secrecy. Dennison also sought out the general's chief of staff and father-in-law, Brigadier General Randolph B. Marcy, in Washington and convinced him also to wire McClellan and urge him to come to the capital immediately to explain to Lincoln "what you propose to do & are now doing," but to see Dennison first. It appears
Dennison believed that his own understanding of the President's mind would help McClellan present his case. True to character, McClellan refused, pleading fatigue, though he directed Marcy to "be careful to have copies of all my dispatches of any importance sent to the Secy & President." On March 12, McClellan's demotion was reported in the National Intelligencer, the leading Washington newspaper. Dennison would not be put off and travelled to Fairfax Court House on the 12th to see McClellan, prompted by yet another meeting with Lincoln that morning. The result was a letter from McClellan to Lincoln that afternoon, probably delivered by Dennison, in which the general acknowledged his demotion and pledged his personal loyalty to Lincoln. Dennison again met with the President, apparently to secure re-affirmation of McClellan's command of the Army of the Potomac, and wrote the general on the 14th, "have just left the President... you command the Army of the Potomac wherever it may go. Everything is right—move as quickly as possible." McClellan went on to conduct the Peninsula Campaign in Virginia, and though he won most of the battles and reached the outskirts of Richmond, he met a Confederate named Robert E. Lee who maneuvered him back to the James River landings by early July. Disheartened, Lincoln would take most of the army away from McClellan, only to bring him
back to command the Army of the Potomac in August following Major General John Pope's defeat at the battle of Second Bull Run. McClellan would fight Lee to a bloody draw at Antietam in September, but his failure to pursue and destroy the Confederate army would prompt Lincoln to fire him again, this time for good.12

Why did Dennison "resist the clamor" against McClellan in March? The Ohio ex-governor was a private citizen, with no official interest in the matter. And he had no reason to be personally sympathetic to McClellan. After all, the Young Napoleon had blocked Dennison's bid for a general's commission a few months before, and Dennison knew it. McClellan's low opinion of politicians was also well known to Dennison who, as governor, had been the recipient of the younger man's rudeness and conceit more than once. Yet McClellan was Ohio's man in the army. McClellan's success strengthened the Union cause in Ohio and, in the manner of Washington politics, strengthened Ohio's prestige in Congress. And Dennison had been the first to appoint McClellan a general. To some degree, the ex-governor's judgment and prestige were at stake too. Also, Dennison's Victorian sense of honor must have dictated that he owed "his man" loyalty. Dennison's concept of both politics and propriety demanded that he stand by McClellan as long as he could do so in good conscience. Another reason for
Dennison's support of McClellan is that the President asked Dennison to act as an intermediary to the general, a request that could hardly be refused. Dennison may also have seen an opportunity to further his personal ambitions.

Dennison continued to defend McClellan until Antietam, after which he endorsed the President's firing of him. Yet Dennison's break with McClellan was not over his generalship so much as it was over politics. McClellan was a Democrat and was flirting with prominent New York Democrats that fall. Eventually he would challenge Lincoln for the Presidency in 1864. This Dennison could not brook. In November 1862, Dennison remarked to Coggeshall that McClellan had become "an instrument of intrigue." In December, during one of his many visits to Washington, Dennison, his own star rising again within Republican circles, sat sadly but coolly at the home of his close friend, Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, listening to McClellan "drawn into a long explanation of the past." It is likely that they never met again.

Governor's Agent:

David Tod soon found that the task of Ohio war governor was a daunting one. At 57, his health was failing and he faced a multitude of difficulties as Ohioans came to realize that this would be a long and costly war. He therefore welcomed Dennison's offer of assistance, couched
as it was behind the veneer of politeness and civility that characterized Dennison's every move.15

While in office, Dennison had devoted considerable energy to the management of Confederate prisoners held in Ohio. He had been asked by the War Office to raise garrison troops for three prison camps in the state, one at Camp Dennison near Cincinnati, one at Camp Chase, and one on Johnson Island near Sandusky. But Dennison also busied himself with the management of these prisons, negotiating releases and other matters with the War Office and the State Department, and trying to sort out state responsibility from that of the federals, without much success. Eventually, the federal government would set up a more methodical prison management system, but in the early years of the conflict, this area of war administration was mostly improvised, like many others. Conditions in Ohio's military prisons worsened as winter came on: sanitation deteriorated, food became meager and poor, and inadequately clothed prisoners suffered from exposure in their leaky and drafty clapboard sheds. Union victories in the West in early 1862 brought trainloads of "fresh fish" from the battlefields, and soon Ohio's prisons bulged with thousands of Rebels in conditions that prompted Columbus Democratic newspaperman Samuel Medary to charge, "Savages do better than this."16 But the "fresh fish" that spring were not
submissive. Cantankerous Johnny Rebs were contemptuous of the understaffed prison guard at Camp Chase. The prisoners taunted their captors, pelted them with refuse, flouted camp rules, and were generally undisciplined. Events came to a head in late May when the prison commander confessed to Governor Tod that he could no longer control his charges and feared an imminent revolt. There were temporarily no state regiments immediately available in Columbus to restore order, and an alarmed Tod turned to Dennison for advice. Dennison approached his former law partner, Henry B. Carrington, now commanding the 18th United States Infantry encamped north of town. The 18th had just completed training and was about to entrain for the front. Carrington paraded his spit-and-polish federals about Camp Chase, allowing the shiny buttons, gleaming bayonets, and overwhelming numbers to intimidate the Rebs into quiescence. Carrington's success probably had more to do with the weak physical condition and innate common sense of the prisoners than with his command presence, but he did succeed, and he avoided the crushed skulls and broken limbs that a more tough-minded soldier would have inflicted in such circumstances. Dennison had proved his usefulness to Tod, and would be called upon again.

"There is no rest for those willing to work; I therefore ask you again for your help." With this note from Tod,
Dennison found himself in Cincinnati once more, representing the ailing Ohio chief executive at a meeting with Indiana Governor Oliver P. Morton "to consult on military matters." Various impertinences by Confederate troops in Kentucky, including the adventures of John Hunt Morgan's cavalry and a sally out of Tennessee by Major General E. Kirby Smith, prompted Tod to send several half-trained fragments of regiments to Kentucky in late 1862, in response to urgent appeals from federal commanders. Dennison was dispatched a few days later to look into the men's welfare and to inform the local federal commander that, since the immediate threat was over, "I [Tod] wish all of them to return at once to the camps they left in Ohio." Dennison made several other trips to Cincinnati and into Kentucky to inquire about the welfare of Ohio troops and to check on the state's southern defenses, much to the annoyance of federal commanders. He more than once vented his patrician's icy politeness upon Major General Horatio G. Wright, the new federal commander of the Department of the Ohio, headquartered in the Queen City. At one point he had Tod telegraph Wright to meet Dennison at seven o'clock the next morning at Dennison's Cincinnati hotel, no doubt ruffling the general's composure. Dennison also sallied to Washington several times, charged by Tod to serve as his intermediary to Stanton at the War Department and to press
for munitions and other supplies for Ohio troops. Dennison gave the War Office the benefit of his gratuitous advice on the conduct of the war in the West, including where to station reserves, how many reserves to form, the need for ironclad gunboats on the Ohio River, and his opinion of local commanders, all in support of the fundamental Dennisonian goal— the forward defense of Ohio. Not surprisingly, none of this endeared Dennison to Stanton or his generals. Wright and Major General Henry W. Halleck, commanding in the West, complained about Dennison's "political scheming," and Stanton was moved to growl at Tod that Wright could manage the defense of Cincinnati "without intervention by an unofficial third party," a clear reference to Dennison.21 But Dennison was re-emerging as a power to be reckoned with in his own right. He clearly had the President's ear, as evidenced by the McClellan affair. Furthermore, he was a competent negotiator, he was politically well connected, and he was willing to work.

From the outset of the war, Governor Dennison received many requests from black Ohioans to enlist in the state's volunteer forces and to raise black companies and regiments. Dennison consistently turned down these offers as, at first, did Tod. As the state's chief executive, Dennison could rightly point to the militia laws which excluded black men from service. But his public position on
slavery and free black persons made it clear that he believed them inferior to whites and incapable of prospering as a free minority within white American society. It follows that he would doubt the ability or inclination of black men to fight for such a society, in spite of the many requests to do so that he received from black volunteers. But during his administration, Dennison had always been able to fill his quotas for troops from volunteers, although it was becoming more difficult to do so by the end of his term. Tod faced greater difficulties. Steady Southern resistance in spite of federal victories in the West, never-ending demands from Washington for more troops, and the shock of the terrible toll of dead and wounded from Shiloh in the West and Antietam in the East, all dampened enthusiasm for enlisting. Inexorably, Tod came to realize that Ohio must resort to a shameful draft of the common militia in order to meet its quota in 1863. And the national climate was changing. The Federal Militia Act of July 17, 1862 eliminated race as a criterion for enlistment. In January of 1863, Massachusetts was the first to obtain federal acceptance of black troops, and many black Ohioans traveled there to enlist since they were denied at home. But Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the impending draft brought a change of attitude, and Tod wrote Stanton in May, 1863 for permission to raise a black
regiment to count against Ohio's quota. After an initial refusal, Stanton agreed, though the black soldiers would be ineligible for the federal enlistment bonuses paid white volunteers. Perhaps the Emancipation Proclamation prompted a change in Dennison's views, or perhaps he reacted only to the reality of Ohio's need for men and to his sense of fair play, but the ex-governor accepted a request from Tod to chair a citizen's committee to raise money for state bonuses to Ohio's black soldiers, though it was couched in terms of relief for their families remaining at home. This was a highly visible public act on Dennison's part, and it marked a fundamental change in his position. In December 1863, the 127th Ohio Volunteer Infantry was mustered into federal service as the state's first black regiment, and saw action in Virginia and North Carolina. It was later re-designated the 5th United States Infantry (Colored).22

Private Citizen:

In spite of his many volunteer activities in support of the Lincoln and Tod administrations, life was less hectic for the Dennison family after the governor left office. Dennison's wife Anne wrote to a friend in March that he had "improved wonderfully and is now looking like his old self."23 Eldest son Niel was distinguishing himself in the army, serving at Antietam and other major battles in the East, and was no doubt the source of dread as well as
pride to his parents. The rest of the large family, ranging from teenagers Lizzy and Erasmus to toddler Alen, was at home in Columbus, where the Dennison household was noted for lively hospitality. An invitation to the Dennison table was much sought after, and a welcome respite for acquaintances passing through town during those hectic war years. Anne founded and was first president of the Columbus chapter of the Soldier's Aid Society, an organization that did much to provide bandages, pharmaceuticals, food, clothing, and other comforts to the troops. The ex-governor was not above using his political influence to his family's benefit. He lobbied Lincoln through Montgomery Blair to obtain Erasmus a much coveted appointment to the Naval Academy where he would be a model midshipman, and where he would be safe from the war. On December 19, 1863, William Dennison Sr., the venerable Cincinnati hotel pioneer, died at his son's home in Columbus at the age of 84 of "old age and prostration."24

Dennison returned to the practice of law, mostly to further his railroad interests. He successfully lobbied the War Department for compensation to the Little Miami Railroad for rolling stock carried off to the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad by overzealous army logisticians. He joined a group of leading Columbus businessmen to lobby for the construction of a federal munitions manufacturing
arsenal in the city. Dennison also used his extensive contacts among railroad interests to advance his personal fortune. He speculated in distressed railroad securities, confident in the knowledge that the war would enhance their value. He also formed the Dennison Land Company in association with several other entrepreneurs, acquiring 132.5 acres of farmland in east-central Ohio with the foreknowledge that the site would become a major crew change, roundhouse, and workshop site for the Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and St. Louis Railroad. The result was the town of Dennison, Ohio, laid out in 1865, no doubt to the substantial enhancement of William Dennison's net worth.25

In Lincoln's Camp:

William Dennison failed re-nomination in 1861 primarily because his political stance between moderates and radicals within the Republican party had become a liability in the new coalition of Republicans and War Democrats called the Union Party. Frightened Republican politicos feared that Dennison was too radical to carry the central and some southern parts of the state. After leaving office however, Dennison soon discovered that his personal influence within the Union movement remained substantial, and that his willingness to work for the party, for Tod, and for Lincoln did not go unnoticed. Dennison was once again invited to speak at public functions. He took to the stump to drum up
volunteers for the army. Following a rousing Dennisonian call to arms and presentation of a battle standard to a new state regiment at Camp Chase, the men marched off chanting "In the name of God, and Governor Tod, we'll follow our flag to Dixie!" No doubt they did. But Dennison also returned to the political activity in which he had been most successful before he ran for governor, he returned to the world of inside politics. By August 1862, just eight months after leaving office, Dennison was once again chairman of the state executive committee of his party, this time of the Republican-Union Party. He had regained his political base.

But political developments in Ohio were not going well for the new party chairman. Municipal and county elections in October of 1862 resulted in a rousing victory for Ohio Democrats and a disaster for the Union coalition. Governor Tod had resorted to a draft of the common militia in late 1862, and there was now talk of the federal government taking over management of the draft nationwide. To many Ohioans, the suggestion that the citizenry lacked sufficient virtue to rise to its duty was an insult. It was but a short step for those who felt that way to question the virtue of the war. Ohioans had been stunned in April by the casualty lists from Shiloh where several Ohio regiments had been engaged, and again by the many hundreds of sick,
wounded, and broken men who limped home throughout the summer from Shiloh and many other battlefields. The scale of carnage inflicted by huge armies with rifled muskets firing Minié bullets and hundreds of tubes firing canister was so far beyond the expectations and experience of Americans that many began to question if the war was worth the cost. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 also alienated many who were not prepared to turn the war into a crusade to free the slaves.28

Into this poisonous political climate stepped Ohio Democrat Clement L. Vallandingham. An eloquent and charismatic politician, the U. S. Congressman from Dayton was a thorn in the side of Lincoln and Washington Republicans until his district was gerrymandered, a returning War Democrat soldier was found to run against him, and he lost his seat. Vallandingham was vociferously against the war, against the supremacy of the federal government over the states, and against the emancipation of slaves. Yet he was less of a partisan of the Confederacy than he was a Western ideologue, holding to the notion of a strong yeoman West tied to the South by the Mississippi and Ohio valleys, nobly resisting exploitation by a predatory and decadent Northeastern seaboard.29 That such a paradigm, if it ever existed, was rapidly being made obsolete by the rise of industrialism and by east-west trade over the railroads, eluded him.
Vallandingham campaigned in Ohio for the Peace Democrat cause. His inflammatory rhetoric drew large crowds, and he played upon the many discontents among Ohioans over the war. Anti-war feeling was increasing, and scuffles between armed citizens and government officials broke out in rural Democratic strongholds over the surrender of military deserters hiding there. A mob, mostly off-duty soldiers from the 2nd Ohio Cavalry, destroyed the office of Samuel Medary's Democratic newspaper The Crisis, though it soon reappeared, printed on borrowed presses. The old gentleman Democrat continued to publish The Crisis and to rail unafraid against Lincoln and the Republicans until his death in 1864. In April 1863, Major General Ambrose E. Burnside, the new commander of the Department of the Ohio, proclaimed that "the habit of declaring sympathies for our enemies will not be allowed in this Department," and threatened a treason trial for violators. Vallandingham took the order as a challenge, proclaiming to a partisan crowd that he "despised it, spit upon it, trampled it" underfoot. Burnside rose to the bait and had Vallandingham arrested, tried by court-martial, and sentenced to death. As anti-war sentiment in Ohio deepened in consequence, Lincoln intervened, commuting the sentence to banishment, and Vallandingham was exiled to the South at the end of May. Vallandingham did not find the Confederacy
congenial, however, and he departed on a blockade runner for Bermuda. He then traveled to Windsor, Ontario, where he continued his anti-war activities by mail and through associates. As a result, enraged Peace Democrats nominated Vallandingham for Ohio governor at their convention in June.32

For Union-Republican party chairman Dennison, the fat was in the fire. Enthusiasm for the Vallandingham ticket early that summer seemed overwhelming, and his election in October unstoppable. There was much more than Ohio politics at stake in this election. A defeat for Ohio Unionists in 1863 would be an ominous portent for a Lincoln re-election in 1864. The possibility of such an outcome was not lost upon Dennison nor upon Republican stalwarts throughout the nation. Dennison issued a stirring call to the party faithful for a state convention in July, ending "may [we] have our determination to utterly crush and annihilate the rebellion reinvigorated."33 But stirring calls were not enough to enliven flagging Unionist spirits. Dennison lined up the heavy guns of the Union movement as speakers and campaigners, including U. S. Senators Benjamin F. Wade and John Sherman, famous war governors Richard Yates of Illinois and Oliver P. Morton of Indiana, and Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, "Mr. Ohio" in Lincoln's cabinet, and a man with whom Dennison's personal relations
were strained. But Dennison and his Republican intimates came up with two more ideas that made a bigger difference.

The first political ploy was to dump David Tod from the ticket, for the same reason Dennison had been dumped two years before. Like Dennison, Tod was a strong and active governor, aggressively supporting Lincoln's war effort and, like Dennison, he had become a lightning rod for popular discontent with the war. In what became known as the "Ohio solution," party insiders dumped Tod and picked another popular ex-Democrat who would support the war, in the hope that some of that discontent would be deflected from the party to Tod. The insiders chose John Brough, a War Democrat, former state auditor and railroad president, who had been out of politics since the 1840s but who had recently re-emerged as a strong Unionist. Unlike Dennison, however, a combative Tod did not take to the "Ohio solution" gracefully. He actively lobbied for renomination, becoming an embarrassment to Dennison and the other insiders as they coolly maneuvered him out and nailed down the nomination for Brough. Hurt, angry, and ill, Tod spurned a subsequent Cabinet offer from Lincoln and retreated into retirement. He died in 1868.

The second initiative by Dennison and the insiders was to maneuver the Ohio legislature into passing a bill
allowing Ohio soldiers to vote from the field, without having to come home to vote in person as had been the previous practice, and which their duties clearly precluded. The assumption was that the soldiers would vote for the Union ticket, one shared by the "Vallandinghamers" who decried the new law. As it turned out, both sides were right. To thundering applause, Dennison was able to introduce as voting delegates to the party convention several lucky soldiers who had been given leave for the purpose by their commanders. Dennison also read from the podium several stirring letters from Ohio regimental commanders in the field calling upon fellow Unionists: "Let us labor--you, as citizens...striving against traitors, we fighting less dangerous foes...for the homes we love so well."36 After Brough's nomination, Brigadier General James A. Garfield, a Dennison intimate, wired from the front: "This army greets John Brough. Ohio soldiers will give him greater greetings in October."37 Dennison had appointed most of these commanders, and now reaped the benefit of having chosen the "right sort"--good Unionists.

Brough won in the fall, 288,374 to 187,492 for Vallandingham. The soldier vote also went for Brough---41,467 to 2,288. Had all the soldiers who voted for Brough gone for Vallandingham instead, the Democrat would still have lost. Two military developments at home had been
particularly important in stiffening the attitude of Ohioans. Kirby Smith's feint against Cincinnati in September 1862 to cover his withdrawal from Kentucky had caused thousands of ordinary citizens to repair to the Queen City from all over the state in response to a call from Tod, brandishing their obsolescent hunting arms. These "Squirrel Hunters" were of little military use, but upon returning home they were of great political value. Thinking themselves victorious, they bolstered the old notions of civic virtue and increased support for the Unionists. John Hunt Morgan's cavalry raid across southern Ohio in July 1863 outraged Ohioans and also strengthened the Union cause. But Vallandingham credited his defeat to the soldier vote, no doubt unwilling to consider that other issues, such as Union military victories and the recognition by Ohio voters that a Vallandingham win might precipitate a permanent dissolution of the Union, may have been more important. The soldier vote may not have won Ohio for the Union cause, but the perception that it had persisted. Lincoln was elated. After sitting up all night following the Ohio election returns by telegraph, Lincoln wired in the morning: "Glory to God in the Highest. Ohio has saved the Union." He was not exaggerating. The Ohio vote, along with Union victories at Vicksburg and at Gettysburg, did signal a change in the political climate in the North.
Peace Democrats had suffered a very large defeat, and Dennison had been a major architect of that defeat. Dennison's star once again shone brightly, and Lincoln took notice.

As a prominent Republican ex-governor, and as the engineer of the Union victory in Ohio, Dennison found himself at the Gettysburg battlefield in October 1863, sitting on the distinguished visitor's platform, as Edward Everett filled the air with eloquent prose and President Lincoln "wove a spell that has not, yet, been broken." Dennison had shrewdly sidestepped another controversy by declining Tod's offer of state transportation, apparently paying his own way or using a railroad pass from one of his many business connections. The Democrats were sniping at Tod for the expense of the "Gettysburg junket." That evening Dennison hosted Lincoln at "the Ohio program," a dinner with the large Ohio delegation to the ceremonies. It was significant that Dennison hosted the dinner, not Tod the sitting governor, nor Brough the governor-elect, both of whom were present. To be sure, Lincoln's presence in the Ohio camp that evening was a Presidential tribute to Ohio's political clout. But, to a lesser extent, it was also recognition of Dennison's contribution to the Union cause.
On December 8, 1863, President Lincoln issued a proclamation outlining his policy for the restoration of civil government in those seceded states that had been retaken by the army. He promised a pardon and restoration of property, except slaves, to all persons taking a simple oath of allegiance to the Constitution. When ten percent of the citizens eligible to vote in the 1860 election had taken the oath, they could reestablish state government and elect members to Congress. This magnanimous plan, aimed at reconciliation, offended Republican hard-liners, particularly influential legislators such as Benjamin F. Wade of Ohio and Henry W. Davis of Maryland, who held out for punishing the rebels and for more specific guarantees of the civil rights of freed blacks. As the split over reconstruction widened among Republicans, as popular discontents like those in Ohio festered in all the North, and as bloody draft riots raged in New York, Salmon P. Chase saw an opportunity to foist the "Ohio solution" upon Lincoln. Ever ambitious for the Presidency, with stronger antislavery credentials than Lincoln, and supremely confident that he was by any measure the better man for the job, Chase began a not-so-surreptitious campaign to deny Lincoln the Union-Republican nomination in 1864 and to secure it for himself. Senator Samuel C. Pomeroy of Kansas was one of Chase's footsoldiers in this campaign and wrote, or caused
to be written, a letter attacking Lincoln's competence and promoting Chase's candidacy. The Pomeroy Circular passed among many Republicans in Congress and elsewhere, gaining Chase some support. In late February 1864, it appeared in the press. The President had been aware for a long time that Chase looked down upon him as an uncouth bumpkin unfit for his office, but a canny Lincoln valued Chase's intellect and reasoned that he was safer in the Cabinet than hatching plots on the outside. After February, however, their relationship was ruined and Chase withdrew his bid to unseat Lincoln. Chase was publicly embarrassed by the revelation of the Pomeroy Circular and tendered his resignation. The President refused the offer at first, but did accept Chase's resignation in June, after the Republican-Union national convention had renominated him for a second term. Lincoln took the opportunity in the fall to stash Chase away on the Supreme Court upon the death of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney. The President went on to cut a deal with Wade, Davis, and the other Radicals that, in effect, postponed the reconstruction debate, somewhat lessening it as a campaign issue among Republicans in 1864.41

The Chase imbroglio and the Pomeroy Circular were big news in Ohio, where Chase was regarded as the state's man in the Cabinet, and by many still as "Mr. Republican" in
Ohio. The Chase bid had split top Ohio Republicans just as it had national party leaders. Dennison had remained staunchly in Lincoln's camp throughout and now reaffirmed his loyalty. Dennison had met in Washington as early as January with Francis P. Blair Sr., the politically powerful father of Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, and with Navy Secretary Gideon Welles, to plot anti-Chase strategy and the renomination of Lincoln. Now that Chase's plot was out and defused, Dennison wrote Lincoln that "Our friend the Secretary...has acted wisely in withdrawing from the contest." He added that he was canvassing Chase's Ohio supporters and "many of the most ardent friends of the Secy heretofore [are now] among your most ardent supporters." He added sagaciously, "Of their sincerity I have, of course, nothing to say." With Chase and McClellan both in disfavor, the two major opponents of Dennison's ambitions for a job in Washington were gone, and Dennison's labors for the Lincoln cause enhanced the ex-governor's claim to the title of "Mr. Republican" in Ohio. Privately, Dennison could not have mourned the political demise of Chase, his old nemesis.

Dennison's next task was to insure that the 1864 Ohio Republican-Union state convention on May 25 endorsed Lincoln. A rump state convention of disaffected Radical Republicans had met in Cleveland two days earlier,
endorsing John C. Frémont now that Chase was no longer available and, though the Chase withdrawal improved Lincoln's prospects, there was still a chance of a reversal in Ohio. But Dennison again played his soldier card, bringing in a soldier delegate fresh from the field as his co-chair, and watching as Colonel Timothy R. Stanley of the 18th Ohio Volunteer Infantry brought the faithful to their feet cheering. Dennison, Stanley, and the insiders staged the shortest Republican state convention yet, and the ex-governor was able to wire Lincoln the evening of the 25th that Ohio Republicans had endorsed his renomination by acclamation.43

By the summer of 1864, Dennison had established himself not only as Lincoln's top man in Ohio, but as a first-class political insider who delivered. His reward was the chairmanship of the Republican-Union National Convention in Baltimore in June. Uncharacteristically, the gentleman ex-governor let his composure slip a couple of times in dealing with the rowdies and hot-bloods on the floor. Perhaps he was discomforted by the rumble of guns audible in the distance. Confederate Lieutenant General Jubal A. Early had crossed the Potomac into Maryland two days before in a drive on Washington, and a division of federal troops was detraining in Baltimore to engage him, tramping through town as Dennison wielded his gavel. But Dennison and the
delegates all knew that the convention was a done deal. Lincoln and his intimates had defused the serious challenges within the party and, despite the daring of Early and the loyalty of his shabby but tough Johnny Rebs, Union soldiers at Gettysburg and Vicksburg had revealed to all Americans how the war must inevitably end. On June 9, Dennison informed Lincoln of his renomination, adding, "To doubt of your triumphant election, would be little short of abandoning the hope of the final suppression of the Rebellion..."44

On September 24, Anne was at home in Columbus when a telegram arrived for her husband who was again out of town. It was not until the 27th that Dennison could reply to Lincoln's call to "come immediately."45 But as he hurried to comply, perhaps his patrician's composure slipped a bit again as the import of the news sunk in. Abraham Lincoln had appointed him Postmaster General. They were on their way to Washington, and he was a full member of the Cabinet. Dennison was well satisfied, and so was Anne.
ENDNOTES

CHAPTER VII


2Ohio, Executive Documents (Columbus: Richard Nevins, State Printer, 1862), Pt. I, 378.


4William T. Coggeshall, The Diary of William T. Coggeshall, October 6, 1861, The Ohio Historical Society.


7Coggeshall Diary, March 14, 1862.

8Ibid.

10 George B. McClellan to Randolph B. Marcy, March 11, 1862, ibid, and 201-202.

11 W. Dennison to George B. McClellan, March 14, 1862, ibid, 207.

12 George B. McClellan to A. Lincoln, March 12, 1862, ibid, and 204-205; McPherson, Battle Cry, 423-427, 525-545; Millett and Maslowski, Common Defense, 175-187.

13 Coggeshall Diary, November 8, 1862.


16 Columbus Crisis, December 26, 1861.


18 Ohio, Executive Documents, 1862, Pt. 1, 81.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid, 80.


clipping, circa 1965, Dennison Railroad Depot Museum, Dennison, Ohio; J. A. Caldwell, History of Belmont and Jefferson Counties, Ohio (Wheeling: The Historical Publishing Company, 1880), Appendix, x.

26Lee, History of Columbus, 119.


30Reid, Ohio in the War, 100.

31Roseboom, Civil War Era, 412.

32Reid, Ohio in the War, 99-129; Roseboom, Civil War Era, 404-415; Faust, Encyclopedia of Civil War, ibid; John R. McKivigan, "The Democracy of Columbus, Ohio During the Civil War," Thesis, The Ohio State University, 1973, 60.

33Smith, History of Republican Party, 154.

34Ibid, 153-154; Roseboom, Civil War Era, 415-421.

35Smith, History of Republican Party, ibid; Roseboom, Civil War Era, ibid; McKivigan, "Democracy of Columbus," 67; Simeon D. Fess, Ohio (New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1937), Vol. IV, 156-156.


43 Smith, History of Republican Party, 190-194; Ohio State Journal, 26 May, 1863.

"This miserable sprawling village imagines itself a city because it is wicked." So observed John Hay, private secretary to President Lincoln, of the nation's capital during the Civil War. As William Dennison shepherded his family into Washington in October, 1864 to take up his new duties as Postmaster General, it might well have appeared so. Although the Dennison's home town of Columbus, Ohio had undergone great changes during the war, such changes were minimal compared to the turmoil in their new residence.

Washington, ever the goal of the Confederate Army, was ringed by the most extensive complex of field fortifications of any city in America, intensifying its inhabitants' sense of being confined in a low swamp. Soldiers were everywhere, joined by throngs of government clerks and bureaucrats, displaced ex-slaves looking for shelter and work, office seekers, merchants, petitioners, inventors, manufacturer's representatives, sutlers, adventurers, idlers, prostitutes, gamblers, assorted criminals, and hordes of delinquent children, mostly boys, engaged in petty crime, or worse. The city's population had exploded
from about 40,000 in 1860 to over 150,000 in 1864, straining its resources. Tens of thousands of horses and mules churned the muddy streets, scattering countless loose hogs, chickens, and geese foraging there. Cattle grazed in every open lot, competing for space with soldiers drilling or pitching tents. The Army had recently constructed an aqueduct that brought fresh water into town and ended the city's reliance upon fetid wells, but sewage remained a major problem. A high water table often precluded privies, so chamber pots were routinely emptied into alleys and streets. The Washington Canal, by which water traffic entered the city, became an open cesspool; human and animal wastes, along with the refuse of slaughterhouses, collected there because the pitch of the low, swampy terrain provided insufficient drainage to carry it away. The result was constant disease, afflicting all residents, rich and poor, and intensifying the misery of thousands of unfortunates confined in the city's many military hospitals.2

Yet Hay's "miserable sprawling village" had its practical side, too. The dome of the Capitol was finally being completed and would gleam brightly for Lincoln's second inaugural in a few months, though the Washington Monument was still an ugly stump. A new federalized municipal police force was in place to deal with that portion of the criminal class that had neither money nor
influence. The railroad station hummed with activity; countless austere new warehouses bulged with war goods; horsemen and wagons scurried everywhere; and always, great legions of well equipped, blue clad soldiers marched through town on their way to nearby battlefields. By 1864, not for the first nor last time in American history, the comic opera of idealistic citizen soldiers that began the war had coalesced into a hard-headed, irreverent, and generally efficient war machine. In the gunpark thousands of round shot squatted in neat black pyramids, and scores of new guns, fresh from the mighty factories of the North, stood hub to hub, their muzzles trained alternatively in opposite directions, like the fingers of children playing Church and Steeple.

And there was charm to the city's wickedness. The war, though painful, long, and costly, now seemed to be grinding to its inexorable conclusion. Hundreds of energetic young officers and civilians doing business with the government brought added spark to the city's entertainments and amusements, formerly the province of legislators, bureaucrats, and diplomats. "You'd be astonished to see what dresses ladies wear...light lavender silks, tulle bonnets looking as though a breath might blow them away," wrote a newcomer, "one would hardly think we were at war, to see the crowds of well dressed men and women flitting
The death of Lincoln's son Willie had driven a distraught Mary Todd Lincoln into inconsolable bereavement, depriving the city's gossips of their sport, clucking at her expensive, girlish frocks, deemed inappropriate to her matronly figure and high position. The opera was in vogue, and popular young John Wilkes Booth was playing in The Apostate at Ford's Theatre. Military balls or "Hops," sponsored by officers of one regiment or another, were a frequent occurrence at the Willard Hotel and other places about town. Dennison's eldest daughter Lizzie would soon be squired to a military ball by John G. Nicolay, Lincoln's other personal secretary, who would write teasingly to his fiancée: "Miss Dennison is a pleasant and intelligent girl who had a narrow escape from being pretty." Narrow escape notwithstanding, Lizzie would soon marry dashing cavalry Major James W. Forsyth, aide to Major General Phillip Sheridan, and a future general in the regular army. The new game of baseball was popular, and for the less athletic, the Union Chess Club organized tournaments. In the coarser parts of town, barrooms, dance halls, gambling dens, and bawdy houses did a rip-roaring business. William Dennison would have reason to ponder wickedness in Washington. He would be a conscientious and competent Postmaster General. He would be exhilarated by the heady atmosphere at the pinnacle of power and he would be a loyal
Cabinet officer. But, with the death of Abraham Lincoln, he would face painful challenges to his beliefs and convictions. Dennison would be forced to look into himself and to choose between conflicting loyalties, incompatible ideologies, and his self-interest. The idealistic certainty and intolerance of his early years would be shaken by the clash of strong passions and iron wills that he encountered in the nation's capital. Dennison would leave Washington with a reputation for indecision and vacillation to go with the one for provincial prudishness that he brought with him, but with his proud self-image intact.

For Lincoln and the Party:

One chronicler of the United States Post Office dubbed the nineteenth century Postmaster General "The Cabinet Politician," referring to the Postmaster General's role in controlling the lion's share of federal spoils, or patronage, and to his resultant strong influence upon state and local stalwarts of the President's party. Local postmasterships were the backbone of political machines in mid-century America. It was the task of the Postmaster General to spearhead the President's political agenda within state and local party councils. It seems clear that this is one of two roles that Lincoln had in mind for Dennison when he appointed him, and was no doubt suggested by the ex-governor's skillful manipulation of Ohio insider
politics during the critical war years since leaving the
governorship. The President seems to also have chosen
Dennison because he anticipated that the Ohioan would be a
loyal supporter in the Cabinet. Lincoln's early Cabinet
consisted of several prominent national Republicans who
believed themselves Lincoln's equal, even his intellectual
and moral superior. Proud men such as Salmon P. Chase at
Treasury, William H. Seward at State, Edwin M. Stanton at
the War Office, Gideon Welles at Navy, and Montgomery Blair
at the Post Office, were all nationally-known politicians.
Most had run against Lincoln for the Republican nomination
in 1860 and had their own constituencies, ambitions, and
agendas. Chase, Seward, and Stanton, in particular, were
prone to openly defy the President, and were not above
contradicting him.\(^8\) Elegant and proper William Dennison,
the suave ex-governor dubbed "frittered in polish" by an
Ohio wag, was not in the same political league, would not
challenge Lincoln in the Cabinet, and could be relied upon
for support by an increasingly self-confident President.

William Dennison's first task was to work for Lincoln's
re-election. On the evening of October 11, 1864, just ten
days after taking office, Dennison joined the President and
most of the Cabinet for an all-night vigil at the War
Department, as the military telegraph clicked out results
of local elections in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana.
Lincoln entertained the gathering with knee-slapping yarns by homespun humorist David R. Locke, who wrote under the pseudonym Petroleum V. Nasby, but the laughter was strained as news from the hustings came in. The Union-Republican tickets suffered several setbacks, even while Governor Oliver P. Morton eked out re-election in Indiana, against strong Democratic opposition and rumors of a Confederate fifth column in the state. Results from Pennsylvania were particularly disappointing, and that state now appeared critical for Lincoln's re-election in November. Dennison, the polished back-room conciliator, was soon on his way to Pennsylvania to campaign for the national ticket and to confer with state Republican bosses. Banished to St. Petersburg in 1862 as Minister to the Court of the Romanovs after his mismanagement and corruption drove Lincoln to fire him as Secretary of War, Simon Cameron was back from exile and once again Republican Czar of Pennsylvania. But Lincoln's contacts reported that a still bitter Cameron had "botched the canvas badly" in the October elections.9 It fell to Dennison to negotiate with Alexander K. McClure, the number two Republican in Pennsylvania and a foe of Cameron, to spearhead the state Union-Republican effort for the President in November. Dennison seems also to have worked to smooth Cameron's ruffled feathers, since Cameron soon wrote inviting McClure to "assist in the contest."10
Ultimately, in a political solution similar to Ohio's, Pennsylvania's soldiers were allowed to vote either by furlough or by election commissioners visiting them in the field, and Lincoln carried the state. Dennison was more messenger and foot-soldier in this effort than architect, as several more prominent Republican names (not least that of Lincoln himself) figured in the outcome, but Dennison was able to return to Washington a success. He had proved his value to the President.¹¹

Dennison also did his political duty in the Cabinet. When he took his seat, Dennison was introduced to an ongoing disagreement over assessing Presidential political appointees for "contributions," or kickbacks, to the Union-Republican National Committee. Navy Secretary Gideon Welles opposed the practice as immoral, while the rest of the Cabinet either supported what was an established custom in American politics or remained silent. Lincoln's position was shrewdly ambivalent if not duplicitous. The President knew that the party needed money to fight Democratic standard-bearer George B. McClellan in November, but he kept a foot on the high ground by holding out against coercion. Dennison caught his chief's drift and spoke out in favor of voluntary assessments, making a generous contribution himself. Executive branch employees found themselves assessed five percent of their salaries for the
party, with the strong suggestion that their jobs depended upon cheerful "voluntary" acceptance. In response to a complaint from New York postal employees asking to be relieved of the tithe, Dennison replied firmly that he "thought it was right." Although the dispute over kickbacks continued into the Johnson administration (and in fact well into the next century), Dennison had played the role Lincoln expected of him. He had sensed the President's mind and had supported him while shielding Lincoln from political fallout.

Another incident at the beginning of his tenure further illustrates Dennison's standing in Lincoln's eyes. With the forced resignation of Salmon P. Chase as Treasury Secretary, there was no Ohioan in the Cabinet, one reason why Lincoln chose Dennison to be Postmaster General. To many Ohioans, their ex-governor then became "Ohio's man" in the Cabinet and their logical spokesman in the Administration. No doubt Dennison fancied himself also head of the "Ohio Gang," the powerful Ohio Congressional delegation and other prominent Ohioans in Washington. Dennison and his bright, ambitious wife Anne seem to have set out with that role in mind by making their home a prominent gathering place for the influential in Washington just as they had done in Columbus. The death of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney on October 12, 1864 offered Dennison an opportunity to test
his role as "Mr. Ohio." Taney, Chief Justice since 1836, would forever be known as the author of the Dred Scott Decision of 1857, that held black Americans had "no rights which the white man was bound to respect" and which was one proximate cause of the Civil War. As such, his passing was little mourned in Republican Washington of 1864. Only Dennison and William H. Seward from the Cabinet joined the President at Taney's funeral service, and none of them went on to the burial. But the race was now on for Taney's replacement. Dennison gathered suggested nominations from prominent Ohioans and relayed them to Lincoln. Many Ohioans favored Salmon P. Chase, some out of admiration, and some out of a sense that Ohio must be assuaged the shame of having a famous son fired from the Cabinet, whatever the cause. As one Cincinnati man put it in a letter to Dennison, the nomination of Chase "would do much to harmonize our difficulties." Others favored Noah H. Swayne of Ohio, a Dennison intimate and a 1862 Lincoln appointee already sitting on the Supreme Court. Speculation for Chase was all about Washington, and the proud ex-Treasury Secretary abetted it with leaks that he had been promised the job. Dennison had strong reason to dislike Chase for slights and insults going back almost a decade, and it should be no surprise that he came out against Chase's nomination and for Swayne's. Dennison couched his
opposition to Chase, though, in terms of concern for the President. In typically tortured Dennisonian syntax, he confided to Welles that he had told Lincoln: "[in] a life tenure--he [Chase] would exhibit his resentments against the President, who he thinks has prevented his upward official career."¹⁶ But the Postmaster General soon discovered that his opinion on the matter carried little weight with Lincoln, as Chase was nominated and confirmed all in one day. Dennison was not aware of Lincoln's selection until it was announced after confirmation by the Senate on December 5. Lincoln had not discussed it with his Cabinet. To make the point more obvious, Dennison and Anne had been at the theatre with Lincoln the night before and the President had kept his counsel, even though a whispered confidence under a pledge of secrecy would have done much to salve his Postmaster General's wounded ego.¹⁷ The message to Dennison was clear: Lincoln expected him to be content as a loyal aide.

And Dennison had reason for contentment. He made a quick trip home to Columbus in November to vote.¹⁸ When he returned, Lincoln had been re-elected. The outlook for the Union cause had never been so bright. Major General William T. Sherman had taken Atlanta and would offer Savannah to Lincoln as a Christmas present. U. S. Grant, now General-in-Chief, had begun the long siege of Richmond. George B.
McClellan had been defeated by Lincoln at the polls as he had been out-foxed by Robert E. Lee in the field. It seemed clear that the war would end during Lincoln's second term, and it was certain that the Republican Party would be firmly in power. All in all, Dennison was a happy man that Christmas.

Managing the Nails:

William Dennison's tenure as Postmaster General was overshadowed by the reputation of his immediate predecessor in the office, Montgomery Blair. Blair was the scion of a distinguished Maryland family. His father, Francis P. Sr., was a long-time power in Washington, an advisor to presidents since Andrew Jackson; he had broken with the Democrats over slavery and the Kansas-Nebraska Act to become an early supporter of Lincoln. Francis P. Jr. was a corps commander in the Army, marching with Sherman to the sea and, like his brother Montgomery, had been prominent in Missouri politics in the immediate pre-war years. The Blairs were strong, acerbic, erudite personalities who "did not suffer fools with any gladness whatsoever." With Montgomery's appointment as Postmaster General in the original Lincoln Cabinet, the younger Blair was soon an intimate of the President, and an unabashed meddler in the affairs of all departments of government. He therefore quickly incurred the wrath of the other Cabinet officers,
and that of the Radical wing of the Republican Party by opposing the timing, but not the fact, of the Emancipation Proclamation. When Confederate General Jubal Early burned Montgomery's Maryland country home in July, 1864, the younger Blair erupted in fury, calling Secretary of War Stanton and his generals "poltroons and cowards" for not protecting his property. His ire was no doubt piqued when he learned that Early and his staff had consumed his stock of fine bourbon whiskey before torching the home. But Montgomery's Cabinet downfall came as a result of intense hostility from the John C. Frémont wing of the Republican Party over differences with the Blair brothers about Missouri politics. Frémont's supporters made it clear to Lincoln at the time of the Union-Republican national convention in June, 1864 that the sacking of Blair was their price for not splitting the party. There is no evidence that Dennison, the convention chairman, was part of this negotiation, but Dennison had been close to the Blairs since their first meeting at the Republican national convention of 1856, and it has been suggested that the Blair family pushed Dennison for the Postmaster Generalship in return for Montgomery's graceful acceptance of his dismissal and continued campaigning for the Lincoln ticket.

Montgomery Blair's management of the Post Office Department was noted for energy and innovation. He
simplified first class mail service by ending varying rates based upon postal zones. He joined negotiations that eventually led to the Union Postale, enhancing mail service between nations. He initiated railway mail service, whereby mail was sorted in special postal railcars while in route between major cities, greatly speeding service. He started the Postal Money Order program for soldiers to send money home, but the service soon became popular nationwide as a secure way to send money through the mails. On July 1, 1863, house-to-house delivery in cities was inaugurated, the greatest achievement of the Blair administration.  

With Blair's record of accomplishment preceding him, it is not surprising that the Dennison tenure at the Post Office Department should appear prosaic and unexceptional at first glance. But Dennison was a competent Postmaster General who built upon his predecessor's successes. One of the issues he dealt with was maintaining mail service to the far West. With the distractions of the Civil War, military operations against Western Indians had abated, and Indian depredations against the mails increased proportionally, particularly on the Great Plains. Dennison reacted by routing the mails by steamer to San Francisco via the Isthmus of Panama, and by lobbying the War Department for more security for his service in the West. In an echo of his behavior as Governor of Ohio, he even proposed the
reorganization of the western military departments and suggested who should command them. In response to requests from new settlers and miners in the Pacific West, Dennison opened new mail routes, established frontier post offices, and generally extended service, toughing out criticism that such extensions were extravagant in war time.  

Blair had inaugurated railway mail service, but it fell to Dennison to make that service work. War demands and the general increase in rail traffic put strains upon railroad operations. Consequently, railroad managers sometimes slighted mail service, which was not always the most profitable segment of their business. Dennison reacted by dealing directly with the presidents of those railroad companies holding mail contracts. Early in his tenure, Dennison called the railroad presidents to a meeting in Philadelphia to address delays in the mails. He brusquely directed the head of one railroad whose line was temporarily out of service to deliver mail cars to his competitor, and not to stack them up awaiting re-opening. "Answer immediately" was the curt ending to his telegram. Learning that some roads were stacking up mail cars in sidings while expediting more lucrative traffic, he summarily directed the presidents to "lessen the mail cars per train and expedite delivery." An ex-railroad president himself, Dennison was not intimidated by the modern jargon
nor the majesty of the rails, less so by haughty railroad presidents. His communications to the railroad presidents were ever polite, but sharp and concise, not at all the painfully convoluted syntax of his political utterances. Dennison's style as Postmaster General is reminiscent of his approach towards the end of his tenure as Governor of Ohio—forceful and clear in executive matters, less so in political affairs.

In one respect Dennison was taught the limits of his power over the mails. Early in his tenure, he proposed appointing postal agents to administer the mails within the Army. This brought a sharp reply from U. S. Grant informing the Postmaster General that the Army's policy was "of prohibiting civilians from having anything to do with the mails within the lines of the Army, and of detailing intelligent, reliable enlisted men for the purpose,..." A growl from the now mighty Grant made Dennison jump almost as high as would one from Lincoln. The Postmaster General quickly acquiesced to the practice prevailing under Blair whereby Colonel A. H. Markland of Grant's staff was recognized as the sole postal agent for the Army. As such, Markland administered the distribution and collection of soldier's mail through the military chain of command. Dennison also agreed not to replace Markland as military postal agent without Grant's "consultation and
Giving vent to his midwestern Victorian prudishness, Dennison forayed once again into the military mails in 1865 when he petitioned the Chairman of the Post Office and Postal Roads Committee of the Senate for legislation enabling postal agents to examine mail destined for the troops to expurgate pornographic material, "since there is much...and there is no law to prevent it." There is no record that he succeeded.

But Dennison had other solid successes. His administration of the Post Office Department was a financial triumph. The Department had been a net drain upon the Treasury before the war, and Dennison was able to report a surplus of almost $900,000 in 1865. This was partly due to the great increase in business brought on by the war and to the popularity of fast reliable service, home delivery, and postal money orders; Dennison was also personally honest and a shrewd financial manager with experience in banking. But the financial surplus was also because the seceding Confederate states had taken their post offices with them, and the Southern post offices, served by poor roads and few railroads, had been money-losers. As the Union army advanced, Dennison was dutiful in reestablishing federal postal service in the South, even though it once again cost more than it brought in.
Tragic Victory:

1865 dawned with portents of triumph and splendor for Republican Washington, and good omens for the Postmaster General as well. Dennison and Anne were part of the throng of distinguished visitors in the House Gallery on January 16, to watch the final vote on the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery. Anne was thrilled by the complimentary article about her husband in Harper's Weekly, which informed its readers that, as governor, Dennison had "never consulted his own ease," that his appointment as Postmaster General "is particularly fitting... and he will honestly and industriously perform his duties." In late February, the Dennison's hosted a large party in their Washington home, a solid social success. Anne had become a noted hostess, recognized for her intelligence and wily promotion of her husband's career. Dennison was feeling secure enough in his new position to entertain thoughts of the future, and opined once again to a visitor from Columbus that he could manage the War Department better than Stanton, and aspired to the job if it should become vacant. Probably about this time Dennison sat for a portrait, no doubt made by Alexander Gardner, since the chair he occupied appears to be the same distinctively ornate studio chair that Lincoln sat in for Gardner's full figure portrait of him in 1863. The crisp
image depicts a fit, clear-eyed, confident Dennison; a handsome man in middle age with chiseled features, a distinguished mane of salt and pepper hair, clean shaven but for fashionable whiskers under the chin, impeccably attired in dark silk, and gazing determinedly camera-right, the very picture of gravitas. On March 5, the war clearly ending, Dennison sat proudly in proud company upon a flag-draped platform and "turned white and red in turns" as Vice President Andrew Johnson, weakened by a recent illness and obviously intoxicated, "disgusted all decent people who heard him."31 Perhaps the prim Postmaster General recovered his composure in time to appreciate Lincoln's delivery of the finest Presidential inaugural address in American history.

On April 9, 1865, Palm Sunday, the news broke of Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia. Fireworks splashed across the Washington sky as the pent up emotions of four dreadful years burst from the city's residents. On Friday April 14, Lincoln presided at a routine Cabinet meeting. Much of the discussion concerned reconstruction of the defeated Confederate states. It had been clear to Dennison for some time that the outline of a disagreement within the government was discernible as Stanton, in sympathy with the Radical Republicans in Congress, held out for a hard-line policy towards the former Rebels and
Lincoln remained steadfast for the more lenient plan he had previously announced. In response to a question from Dennison, the President now suggested that Federal authorities look the other way should prominent ex-Confederate leaders seek to flee the country. Dennison was loyally on the President's side. In a speech four days before, Dennison had echoed Lincoln's second inaugural by attributing victory to "Divine favor which has enlightened our darkest hours," and, with respect to the Rebels, "we can well afford to be magnanimous." Perhaps the Postmaster General took heart that Father Abraham's popularity, and therefore his political clout, was greater than ever now that military victory had followed his win at the polls. Dennison looked forward to four years of working with Lincoln to implement his policy.

Dennison was at home, probably asleep, later that evening, when a pounding at his door called him into a raw, damp night. He hurried though the drizzle to Ford's Theatre on 10th Street, and from there followed the commotion to William Peterson's boarding house across the street. He pushed his way through a crowd of bystanders, some curious, some weeping, to find most of the Cabinet and some other prominent Washingtonians crowded into a small bedroom rented by boarder William Clark. There, upon a simple walnut bedstead too small for his large frame, lay Abraham
Lincoln, blood and brain tissue seeping upon the pillow at his head. It was a long vigil. Mary Todd Lincoln, clearly in shock, anguished in an adjoining room, and periodically approached her husband's bedside with tearful entreaties that he rise. Lincoln's eldest son Robert wept on the shoulder of Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. Vice President Johnson arrived hurriedly on foot during the night, but soon left upon being told that his presence disturbed Mrs. Lincoln. The atmosphere was close and clammy, and those who could broke the tension with walks through the light rain of Saturday morning. Physicians did what little they could, but Lincoln's breathing became irregular as cerebral hemorrhage raised a huge swelling behind his right eye, grotesquely distorting his features. At about half-past seven on the morning of April 15, the vigil was over, and a subdued Dennison caucussed with the Cabinet, all present except for the Vice President and Secretary of State Seward, who had been attacked in the same conspiracy and lay wounded at home. The Cabinet members briefly discussed the proper form for informing Andrew Johnson that he was President of the United States, and settled upon a committee of Attorney General James Speed and Secretary of the Treasury Hugh McCulloch to make the notification. Later in the day, Dennison was a witness in Suite 68 of the Kirkwood House as President Johnson took
the oath of office from Chief Justice Chase. When Dennison arrived home he found a military guard posted, part of Stanton's nervous precautions lest there be a further conspiracy against the government.33

Dennison and Anne were prominent in the subsequent state ceremonies of mourning in Washington. Anne was one of six official "lady mourners" at the state funeral on April 20. Her husband, misinformed by Stanton as to the time, would have missed the memorial in the rotunda of the Capitol on April 21 had not Gideon Welles stopped by their home with a carriage to give him a lift. Roused from slumber, an ever gallant Dennison was ready in five minutes.34 As the black-draped funeral train left Washington later that day, the major turning point of Dennison's life had begun.

Untenable:

The opening months of the Andrew Johnson Administration were pleasant enough for William and Anne Dennison. In May, they were privileged spectators at the Grand Review of the Armies, when two full Union armies paraded before Johnson, Grant, scores of other dignitaries, and almost everyone else in Washington. It is likely that their eldest son Neil rode in that parade, since he was part of the Army of the Potomac at the time, commanding a battery of light artillery. The Dennisons were very proud of their first born who had become a recognized war hero, and they were most
grateful that Neil had survived the war with only minor wounds that seemed to have healed. The Dennisons accompa­nied Navy Secretary Welles and his wife on a cruise aboard a Navy steamer that spring, visiting Savannah and Charleston, marveling at the destruction of the war, and musing about the nation's future. Nine months later, on January 24, 1866, the Dennison's last child, Perry, was born. As with many late children, Perry became a favorite of his parents and of his much older siblings.35

The new President asked the Lincoln Cabinet officers to remain in their posts. An early crisis for the new Adminis­tration was the unexpected surrender terms granted by Major General William T. Sherman to Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston in North Carolina on April 18. Sherman's terms allowed the defeated Confederates to stack their arms in state armories under state control and, in effect, obliga­ted the Federal government to recognize the sitting Confederate state governments. Thereafter, Sherman always maintained that his terms were "right, honest, and good," but they were, in fact, a major political blunder.36

Reaction in Republican Washington was violently against Sherman's terms, and there were wild suggestions that the taciturn Union commander was deliberately undermining the Federal government or even plotting a coup. Ideologically committed to a tough policy towards the ex-Confederates,
Secretary of War Stanton was taking the matter most seriously. Grant, now often a participant in Cabinet meetings, was loyal to his trusted subordinate but opposed his peace terms, and sought a way out of the embarrassment without sacking Sherman. Dennison joined the moderates within the Cabinet in defending the character and loyalty, if not the judgment, of Ohio native Sherman, and took satisfaction in the resultant compromise which sent Grant to Sherman's headquarters to read him the riot act and to dictate new surrender terms in consonance with Federal policy. Perhaps this defense of his protegé indebted Grant to Dennison and may have been why, several years later, President Grant would come to Dennison's aid when private citizen Dennison was sorely in need of a friend.

Dennison remained true to his Western roots in other ways. In both the Lincoln and Johnson Cabinets, the Postmaster General was adamant against the French incursion into Mexico. Dennison argued for expulsion of the French Army and France's puppet emperor Maximilian from Mexico City, even if that meant war. Dennison supported the stationing of fifty-thousand Union troops in defeated Texas under Major General Phillip H. Sheridan to intimidate the French, even though he was in favor of rapid demobilization of the Army, both for financial reasons and because of an ideological aversion to standing armies in peacetime.
Dennison couched his opposition to the French in Mexico in terms of adherence to the Monroe Doctrine and a characteristically American abhorrence of European meddling in the hemisphere.38

Soon after Lincoln's re-election in November, 1864, and early in Dennison's term of office, a movement arose among Republican leaders in county court houses, state houses, and in Congress for a re-distribution, or "rotation," of Federal patronage. This would have caused great turmoil in the Post Office Department, since it would have meant a wholesale change in local postmasters. Lincoln, fed up with office-seekers for the time being, quashed the movement and directed that no changes in appointed offices be made without cause. Dennison continued Montgomery Blair's policy of appointing good Republicans to big-city postmasterships, and of deferring to Republican Senators and Congressmen on major appointments within their states and districts. He also appointed some war widows and wounded veterans to smaller postmasterships. But as the Johnson Administration progressed, it became increasingly difficult for Dennison to manage postal appointments. As Johnson revealed himself in ideological opposition to the Radical Republicans in Congress, Dennison's practice of soliciting nominations from Republican Congressmen and Senators incurred the President's displeasure. Johnson sought control of Federal
patronage to enhance his own political agenda, and Dennison found that his power to make appointments was increasingly delimited. More and more frequently, Dennison received curt notes from Johnson's secretary directing specific appointments, and the President became less accessible to his Postmaster General to discuss nominations. To the proud and proper Dennison with his patrician sense of propriety, this was a most difficult situation.

Of much greater importance were the issues which underlay the President's behavior. Andrew Johnson was a self-educated frontier politician from Tennessee of humble origins and Jacksonian Democrat inclinations, who had come out against secession early in the conflict. In acts of considerable courage, the pugnacious Johnson served as Union governor of those parts of Tennessee under Federal control, even as battles of both words and bullets swirled about him. The Union-Republicans picked Johnson as Lincoln's running mate in 1864 to balance the ticket with a Southern War Democrat and in the expectation that he would serve in quiet obscurity as befitted a Vice President, but chance had ruled otherwise. Determined to carry on Lincoln's Reconstruction policy, though without Lincoln's political acumen or popular mandate, Johnson issued a proclamation in May allowing the ex-Confederate states to reconstitute their governments. Voters who took a pledge of
future loyalty to the Constitution could vote for delegates to state conventions. Those conventions must then repeal the Confederate ordinances of secession, repudiate the Rebel war debt, and ratify the Thirteenth Amendment. The former Confederate states could then reconstitute state government and rejoin the Union. Johnson added a fillip that revealed his plebeian prejudice by requiring individual ex-Confederates with more than $20,000 in property to appeal individually for pardons before their civil rights could be restored. Dennison recognized that Johnson's plan would not play well with the Radical Republicans who now controlled the Congress, since it was not sufficiently punitive, and it did not guarantee the civil rights of Southern blacks. The Postmaster General therefore spoke out in Cabinet discussions on the subject. Dennison made it clear that he supported the proclamation, but that it should be strengthened with specific protections of the civil rights of Southern blacks, thus increasing its acceptability to the Congress.Ò The President was not convinced. Dennison had played his hand and identified himself as a conciliator between the President and the Radical Republicans. It was a difficult role, since he would be unwelcome playing it in either camp, and he would fail.
When Congress reconvened in December 1865, a Radical Republican majority denied seats to Southern delegations elected under Johnson's reconstruction plan. In a further challenge to the President, Congress passed a bill indefinitely extending the Freedman's Bureau established during the Lincoln Administration which provided Federal assistance to ex-slaves. Branding the act unwarranted interference by the Federal government in state affairs, Johnson vetoed it. It was becoming apparent that Johnson's aim was to split the Union-Republican coalition, leading the old War Democrats and Unionists away from the Radical Republicans to form a separate party. This presented a serious dilemma to Dennison. An old Whig, Dennison was somewhat more sympathetic to the Radical Republican cause than to the Unionist wing, but he was most of all acentrist and he believed in the Lincoln Union-Republican coalition. The Postmaster General chose to support his President publicly, while working for conciliation behind the scenes. In February, 1866, Dennison delivered a speech at the Cooper Union in New York City, publicly supporting and justifying the President's veto of the Freedman's Bureau, and wrote an open letter to Republicans in New Hampshire urging support for the Union-Republican ticket there. Within the Cabinet, Dennison approached Secretary of the Treasury McCulloch and Navy Secretary Welles,
suggesting that the three of them "consult with the
President in regard to the welfare of the Republican Party
and endeavor to bring about a reconciliation with the
factious majority in Congress." But the Cabinet was now
dividing as well, and Dennison was rebuffed. When the
Congress challenged Johnson again by passing a Civil Rights
Bill guaranteeing minimum civil rights to all citizens,
including black Americans, the President again used his
veto. This time Dennison could not support his President,
and spoke out in the Cabinet against the veto. Even
though Dennison had the cold satisfaction of watching
Congress override the veto of the Civil Rights Bill,
justifying his opposition, the Postmaster General's
position in the Cabinet was becoming increasingly uncom-
fortable and isolated.

William Dennison's position as head of the "Ohio Gang"
in Washington, and his political base in Ohio, began to
erode during this time as well. Dennison protegé Jacob D.
Cox had risen to the rank of major general during the war,
and ran successfully for Governor of Ohio in 1865, the last
of the Union-Republican governors of the state. An ardent
abolitionist before the war with strong ties to Oberlin
College and the Reverend Charles G. Finney, Cox astounded
Ohio Republicans in 1865 by coming out against full civil
rights for blacks and for a scheme to establish a
reservation for ex-slaves in the deep South. Cox also supported Johnson and tried for a compromise to keep the Republican-Union coalition together in Ohio. In February 1866, Dennison hosted Cox in Washington and brought together the entire Ohio Congressional delegation in his home to hear Cox's views. The meeting was a failure. Though the Democrats had made a strong showing in the 1865 Ohio elections, the Ohio Congressional delegation was mostly Radical Republican and in no mood for compromise with the President. Bluff Ben Wade was still in the Senate, and a leader of the Radicals. Shrewd and capable John Sherman, brother of General W. T. Sherman, was the state's other senator and, though less radical, had decided that there was nothing to be gained by supporting Johnson.43 Dennison was further weakened, and he determined to attend the Ohio Republican convention in June to scout the political landscape.

And Dennison was further undercut in his position as Postmaster General. Upon taking up his duties in October, 1864, Dennison inherited Alexander W. Randall as First Assistant Postmaster General. Randall had been War Governor of Wisconsin and the two had met at the Cleveland Conference of 1861. Failing renomination, Randall had been sent to Rome by Lincoln as Minister in 1862, and the President appointed him First Assistant Postmaster General
to Blair in 1863. Randall came to the Union-Republican movement from the Democratic Party, and was therefore inclined to the Johnson position in the quarrel over reconstruction with Congress. But mostly he was hungry for Dennison's job, resenting the Ohioan's tenure. Soon after the Lincoln assassination, Randall approached Johnson directly with offers of support and became an intimate, to the exclusion of Dennison. Randall organized a Union Johnson Club out of his office, garnering support from some War Democrats and Unionists in Washington, most notably Montgomery. Blair, Dennison's close friend. Randall was soon president of the executive committee of the National Union party, the political movement Johnson was attempting to form in opposition to the Radical Republicans. Randall and his associates hit upon a scheme to "smoke out" Radicals in the Cabinet by staging a "serenade" at the homes of Cabinet officers, obligating them to speak out publicly on major issues. While several Cabinet officers sidestepped the challenge by not being home when the "serenaders" arrived, Dennison chose to deliver a soothing and patently false Dennisonianism claiming that there were no differences between the President and Congress and that "everything is all right."44

Everything was not all right. Randall was deliberately undercutting Dennison with the President. The President was
ignoring Dennison when making Post Office appointments, and Dennison's repeated attempts at conciliation in the Cabinet were only annoying the gruff Johnson and his partisans. "Mr. Dennison is neither one thing nor the other," wrote a Johnson man, "neither hot nor cold, but wishy-washy and vacillating...He would begin to talk as if he had an idea in his head, but before reaching the end of a sentence it would evaporate, and he would become unintelligible."45 Further, Dennison's attempts at conciliation had met no support in Congress either. Matters came to a head in June, 1866, when Dennison attended the Republican state convention in Ohio. Johnson had come out in opposition to the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution then pending in Congress, and had called a National Union convention to challenge the Republicans. This Dennison could not support. Dennison conferred with Ohio Republican leaders and decided that his position in the Cabinet had become untenable. On July 11, 1866, he resigned. He wrote to a friend, "I waited patiently for a reconciliation between the President and... Congress...but the President's opposition to the [14th] Amendment and approval of the Phil. convention [National Union] left me no room... To remain...could only have been at the sacrifice of my manhood."46 Dennison also wrote to Cox acknowledging that his resignation ended any chance for a reconciliation, but he concluded: "I felt it my duty to resign, whatever the consequences."47
William Dennison left wicked Washington and took his family home to Columbus that summer, an unhappy man. Some pundits claimed that he did not expect his resignation to be accepted, and that he was shocked and hurt when it was, but that is unlikely. Dennison was a shrewd politician, and he knew that Johnson wanted him out. But Dennison suffered political damage from his attempt at conciliation. Since most of his public utterances were in support of Johnson, many Ohioans branded him, incorrectly, a Johnson Unionist. The Union movement was dead in Ohio, as in most other parts of the nation, and Ohio politics was once again a contest between Republicans and Democrats, with the Radicals in a strong position among the Republicans. Old Ohio Democrat and curmudgeon Samuel Medary intended grudging praise but only injured Dennison further in the eyes of Ohio Republicans when he wrote in The Crisis that Dennison's resignation was the passing of "the least odious Cabinet minister." Dennison's sincere attempts at conciliation were known only to party insiders, and then regarded as misguided labors in support of a wrong cause. Dennison appeared tainted to Ohio Republicans, and it would be a while before he was fully readmitted to party intimacies.
ENDNOTES
CHAPTER VIII


4Green, Washington, 269.


6Faust, Encyclopedia of the Civil War, 440; Green, Washington, 244-271; Bryan, History of the National Capital, 461-467.


20Ibid, 83.


22Cullinan, *Postal Service*, 83-86.


27W. Dennison to U. S. Grant, October 31, 1864, *Post Office Ledger Book*.

28W. Dennison to Senator Jacob Cullamer, January 12, 1865, *Post Office Ledger Book*. 


34 New York Times, April 20, 1865; Welles, Diary, Vol. II, 293.

35 War of the Rebellion, Ser. I, Vol. XLVII, Pt. 3, 1049; Faust, Encyclopedia of the Civil War, 319; Welles, Diary, 310; Greenlawn Cemetery Records, Columbus, Ohio.
36 Faust, Encyclopedia of the Civil War, 683.


40 Castel, Andrew Johnson, 1-15, 26; Faust, Encyclopedia of the Civil War, 395-396; Fowler, Cabinet Politician, 126-129.

41 Welles, Diary, 446-447.

42 Welles, Diary, 464; Castel, Andrew Johnson, 70-71; Donald, Liberty and Union, 196.

43 The Governors of Ohio (Columbus: The Ohio Historical Society, 1954), 89-92; Castel, Andrew Johnson, 71; William T. Coghehail, Diary of William T. Coggeshall, The Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio, March 4, 1866; Robert D. Sawrey, "Ohio and Reconstruction: The Search for Future Security, 1865-1868," PhD Diss., The University of Cincinnati, 1979, 101; Cincinnati Daily Commercial, February 27, 1866.


46 W. Dennison to J. J. Janney, July 19, 1866, J. J. Janney Papers, The Ohio Historical Society.


49 The Crisis, July 18, 1866.
CHAPTER IX
THE TROUBLES

The William Dennison family came home to Columbus in the summer of 1866 just as the last Union volunteers to be mustered out in that city were being paid off. The transition to peacetime pursuits was all but complete, and eager Ohioans were getting on with their lives after the long interruption of war. Few physical reminders of the conflict remained. The last of the Confederate prisoners confined in the city had taken the oath of allegiance and had been released by July, 1865. Camp Chase and the other military encampments around town had been closed, and the leftover buildings and equipment had been hurriedly sold off. The ladies volunteer soldiers' aid shelter near the railroad station that Anne Dennison had helped found in 1861 had just closed in May, 1866, more than a year after the end of the war. For all this time, it had been haven for a small backwash of the most unfortunate veterans, poor, with wounded souls and torn flesh, who still sought shelter from their bewilderment. Ohio was shortly to open a State Soldiers' Home, where over 250 veterans would find refuge by the end of 1866. The city's roads were much the worse
for wear, and the municipal government was at work grading ruts and spreading gravel. The fine new brick, stone, and slate federal armory that Dennison had lobbied for in 1863 was in place, and the War Department had decided to keep it open, much to the satisfaction of city fathers.¹

Dennison had entertained hopes of winning Ben Wade's U.S. Senate seat in 1866, but it was soon clear that the composition of the Ohio legislature and his own often misunderstood political stance made that most unlikely. As much as he had reason to dislike President Andrew Johnson and disapprove of his policy, Dennison spoke out in November against the impeachment trial of the President. He reasoned that Johnson would have to "commit many infinitely more flagrant acts than he has yet been accused of, to enable the indictment to stand."² Dennison went on to reaffirm his commitment to the Fourteenth Amendment and his support for strong federal measures to insure that the Southern states complied. This was farsighted perhaps, certainly reasonable, judicious, and statesmanlike, but it did not go over well with Ohio Republicans who were increasingly caught up with the idea of punishing both Johnson and the South. Dennison appeared all the more a backslider, just like his friend, ex-Governor Jacob D. Cox. It was soon clear to Dennison that he was out of touch with Ohio politics. He was not invited to resume his position on
the Central Committee of the state Republican Party, and his name does not appear in the proceedings of the 1866 or 1867 state conventions.\textsuperscript{3} As Dennison resolved to put his political ambitions on hold and to devote himself to private endeavors, fate had repeated blows in store for him over the next several years.

\textbf{Financier:}

The Ohio economy, like that of the rest of the North, was booming in the wake of the Civil War. Greatly increased agricultural output, industrial production, financial markets, telegraph, and rail service were the direct result of the huge Union war effort. And the North had been spared the devastation that had befallen the Southern states. Westward expansion continued, and two great railroad companies raced to finish a transcontinental line. The National Banking Acts of 1863 and 1864 had done for nationwide banking what the Ohio Banking Reform Act of 1845 had done for Ohio banking, and new federally chartered national banks were opening in major cities, enjoying the profitable privilege of issuing federal banknotes in exchange for the obligation of holding federal bonds. A federal tax on state and private banknotes drove competing currency out of existence, marking the end of the "redback" in Ohio. Dennison had opposed federal banking laws as an unnecessary intrusion by the national government into local affairs,
but once they passed he was quick to associate himself with William G. Deshler and become a founding director of the National Exchange Bank and a director of the Franklin National Bank, both of Columbus.4

Dennison re-entered business life with a flourish. He became sole trustee of a 1.5 million dollar loan to a group of entrepreneurs planning to build the Columbus and Hocking Valley Railroad, taking a first mortgage on all the line's assets as collateral. At the time, this was a huge financial transaction for one man to make, a clear indication that Dennison had accumulated a substantial fortune, and that he had clout in financial circles. It was not the first time that construction of the line had been attempted, but now it was successful. Dennison took a seat on the line's board of directors to protect his interests, and skillfully fended off hostile takeover attempts in 1872 and 1874.5

In December 1866, trustees of the Central Ohio Railroad cut a deal with the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to lease their line and operate it as a division of the Baltimore and Ohio. Dennison's investment in creating the town of Dennison, Ohio now paid off handsomely as repair yards, passenger accommodations, and crew change facilities enhanced the town's land values. Similarly, the Little Miami Railroad, which had swallowed the Columbus and Kenia
Railroad before the war, was leased to the Pittsburgh, Cincinnati and St. Louis Railroad in 1869, much to the benefit of its stockholders, including William Dennison. He also participated in 1866 and 1870 as an investor and founding director of the Columbus Rolling Mill Company and of the Columbus Iron Company, both producing iron rails for the booming railroad industry.6

Dennison became involved with some less profitable ventures as well. In 1871, he joined the Neil family to launch a street railway linking downtown Columbus with a new residential development at the edge of town. The project was never financially viable and was later abandoned. Dennison also advised Rutherford B. Hayes against becoming involved in a scheme to build a railroad from Columbus to Toledo via Hayes' hometown of Fremont, suggesting that its competition was too strong. But Dennison was ever the booster of business and civic life in Columbus and central Ohio. He was prominent in relief efforts for victims of the Chicago fire of 1871, giving $1000 to the cause himself. And he was a guiding light in the movement to form a Board of Trade in Columbus to promote industry and commerce in the region.7 It was a heady time for businessmen and financiers, and William Dennison was deeply involved. The economy was booming, Dennison was prospering, the nation was secure, his ideals had been vindicated in a great and righteous crusade, and life was good.
On September 18, 1873, at a few minutes past eleven o'clock in the morning, a sign was posted in the window of the New York investment banking house of Jay Cooke and Company announcing that the firm "had been obliged to suspend payment." The news flashed by wire across the nation, and by word of mouth through every financial district, near and far. The New York Stock Exchange collapsed, and trading was suspended for ten days. As banks closed across the country, some "busted" bankers ran away in shame, and at least one committed suicide. Speculation in railroad securities and various other promising new ventures had reached unsustainable heights and markets were plunged into a crash deeper and longer than the pre-war "panics" older Americans remembered. Dennison was stunned. The delicate interrelationship of national markets, and Dennison's vulnerability to events far away and not of his doing were not what his pre-war financial experience had prepared him for. William Dennison was able to cover his obligations, but only just, and the substantial personal fortune that he had accumulated since launching his career in 1840 was lost. Dennison's sense of propriety and equity to Anne and to his children had kept him from commingling Anne's substantial Neil family inheritance, mostly Columbus real estate, with his own wealth over the years of their marriage, even though law and custom of his day expected
him to. As a consequence, a comfortable family income remained, sufficient to support the Dennisons' upper-class provincial way of life and to continue educating their sons at Eastern colleges, but William Dennison's self-esteem was crushed. He would spend the rest of his life trying to reestablish his personal worth.9

Return to Politics:

In his heart and soul William Dennison was a politician. His exile from politics during the first few years after resigning from the Johnson Cabinet was difficult, as he watched his party tear itself apart while the strength of the Democrats increased. It was soon clear that the political coalition that Dennison and other party insiders had forged at the beginning of the war was fragile. The hard-line positions of Radical Republicans drove most of the old War Democrats away from the Republican-Union movement and back to the Democrats or into splinter groups. But deeper divisions appeared within the ranks of the remaining Republicans. The coalition of the 1840s and 1850s that formed the original Republican Party was also under strain. Those who had come to the Republican cause from the Jacksonian Democrats found it increasingly uncomfortable to coexist with those from the old Whig tradition. Although unfair to Dennison, who was in fact a moderate and a cooperationist within this spectrum, the renewed
divisiveness among Republicans was expressed in a comment by a fellow cabinet officer at the time of his resignation in early 1866: "Dennison [and the]...leading Radicals, especially those of Whig antecedents,...are afraid to trust the people."¹⁰ More to the point, the Civil War had eliminated the one great unifying force within Ohio Republican politics, opposition to slavery, thus exposing a weak ideological foundation underneath. The result was near chaos within party ranks, as individuals and small groups with narrow agendas jostled for power "in perfect disregard of all unity."¹¹

The Ohio Constitution of 1851 still restricted the vote to white men. As the national struggle raged between Congress and the President over reconstruction of the South, "Negro suffrage" became the central issue in Ohio politics. Radical Republicans, mostly from Northern Ohio, proposed a state constitutional amendment removing racial restrictions to voting. Reinvigorated Democrats seized upon the issue and rallied against it. They warned of floods of newly freed ex-slaves inundating Ohio cities and towns, driving down wages and impoverishing hard-working white laborers, yeomen, and mechanics. Dark warnings of "miscegenation" and of "desecration of white virgins" festooned Democratic campaign rhetoric. The widespread notion among ordinary white Americans, North and South, that the
reconstruction agenda (including voting rights for blacks) promoted by Radical Republicans in Congress was not so much motivated by humanitarianism, but was in truth a punitive crusade to punish Southern whites for the rebellion, worked to strengthen the Democrats' position in Ohio. Many Ohioans, including Union veterans, insisted that they not be subjected to the same humiliation as white Southerners by having to share the vote with blacks. Broken and fragmented by the Civil War, the Ohio Democratic Party was given new life by this issue. Negro suffrage remained the most bitterly divisive issue in Ohio politics until February 1870 when the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified. In political limbo during the early years of this controversy, Dennison was nevertheless not silent about it. The Civil War, and association with Lincoln in the Cabinet, had sharpened his understanding. Dennison believed that the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution were the great achievements of his generation of Republicans, and he remained steadfast for the rest of his life in praise of "the three amendments," as he called them.12

And other old divisions reappeared. Democrats campaigned against the banking reform laws passed by the Republican Congress during the war. They championed a return to specie payments, particularly repayment of the state war debt in
specie rather than in greenbacks. Most Republicans remained in opposition, arguing that the new U. S. paper currency was as good as gold. The tariff issue reemerged, with Republicans defending protective tariffs for domestic manufacturers and Democrats favoring the importation of cheaper foreign goods to benefit consumers. Ohio Republicans were badly fractured by local issues, conflicting personalities, and weak leadership; Dennison watched as the state party chairman worked openly against his party's nominee for governor in 1868 because he was from a different faction of the party. As Dennison sadly observed from the sidelines, war hero Rutherford B. Hayes eked out only a very narrow win for Republicans in the 1868 gubernatorial contest, while the Democrats took both houses of the Ohio legislature. Since this was the legislative session during which Ben Wade's U. S. Senate term expired, there was no chance that any Republican, let alone an inactive one like Dennison, would be selected to fill the seat.¹³

But by 1868, events were becoming a bit brighter for Ohio Republicans. The older generation of uncompromising idealists was passing, as men like Joshua Giddings, David Tod, and now Ben Wade passed from the scene. A new generation of leaders emerged from among Civil War veterans. These war-hardened younger men were less concerned with the old issues, more pragmatic, less ideological, more inclined
towards party unity, and intolerant of factionalism within party ranks. Men such as Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, and William McKinley, would dominate the party during the remainder of the century, along with pragmatic and unemotional John Sherman. In May, national Republicans settled upon Ulysses S. Grant as their presidential candidate, virtually assuring recapture of the White House after the embarrassment of the Johnson Administration. In June, 1869, after a reshuffling of state party leadership, William Dennison was finally allowed to reemerge within the Ohio Republican party, but only as an "advisory member" of the state central committee. He then dutifully served on the resolutions committee of the 1870 state convention, thus demonstrating that he was not too proud to labor in the political vineyards for his party. With his political rehabilitation, Dennison's ambitions soared.14

One interpreter of Ohio history has labeled Dennison's service to the party during the late 1860s and early 1870s as "essentially decorative."15 Although this is a correct historical judgment based upon results, it does not properly describe Dennison's ambitions. As both his political and business fortunes brightened, Dennison aspired once more to public office. Friends suggested that he offer himself for governor again upon the expiration of Hayes's term, but Dennison refused. He had been governor, and he
had his eye on bigger game. Dennison's political rehabilitation seemed complete when he served as permanent chair of the state convention in June, 1871, once again playing the role of conciliator, party booster, and back-room negotiator. Dennison was out for nothing less than the Vice Presidency in 1872.

Dennison put out his feelers in earnest during January, 1872, writing to party leaders, sounding out his chances for the Vice Presidential nomination. Replies were non-committal, but not overtly negative. Mistaking politeness for support, Dennison actively pursued the endorsement of Ohio Republicans. At the state convention in March, he made his play. Dennison secured a non-binding resolution from the convention at large endorsing his candidacy, and he appeared to be on his way. But it was not to be. It became clear during a subsequent caucus of the Ohio delegates to the national convention that he did not have their unanimous support. Greatly disappointed, a proud Dennison withdrew his candidacy rather than suffer what to him would be the humiliation of a divided favorite son vote only on the first ballot. Dennison needed the solid support of the entire Ohio delegation, and the ability to maneuver the large Ohio vote as a block in the back rooms, if he were to have any chance at the national convention, and he did not have that support.
In retrospect, it is clear that Dennison's ambition for the Vice Presidency in 1872 was unrealistic. Grant was certain to run again, and the President was an Ohioan by birth, a Westerner by association. Dennison would not bring needed balance to such a ticket. It was not clear before the national convention whether Vice President Schuyler Colfax, weakened by scandal, would run again, but if Grant had given him the nod, he most likely would have been renominated. And there were powerful Eastern Republicans such as James G. Blaine and Henry Wilson out for the job. As assiduous as Dennison had been reestablishing his political credentials among Ohio political insiders, he never had the wide popular support among rank-and-file Republicans that would translate into solid support at the convention. Dennison had suffered a substantial political defeat, and he would not again be a serious contender for elected office. This was also the time that William and Anne Dennison were preoccupied hiding a scandal in the family.

Not A Soldier's Woman:

William Neil Dennison, or Neil as he was known, was a true hero of the Civil War. Nineteen years old when the shooting started in April 1861, Neil left his senior class at Kenyon College and rushed to Columbus to solicit a place in the army from his father, the Governor. In later years,
Neil would claim to have been the first Ohioan to volunteer for Ohio forces in the war. That cannot be confirmed, but it appears that his father commissioned him, possibly as a major of volunteers, very early in the war, and that he soon found himself on the staff of George McClellan in Cincinnati.19

It is not clear what McClellan did with this militarily ignorant but smart, eager, and well-connected young man, though Neil did accompany the general into western Virginia in May. In July, when the regular army was increased by about fifty thousand, scores of regular commissions became available, as there were not enough Military and Naval Academy graduates to go around. No doubt through his father's influence, and perhaps by perseverance, the young man snared a federal appointment as second lieutenant. But Neil was not just any lieutenant, he was Second Lieutenant of Artillery. Within the caste hierarchy of the nineteenth century army, artillery officers stood below only engineering officers among the combat arms, and above infantry and cavalry officers. And Neil's was a regular commission, not one in the federal volunteer service. If he survived the war, he had a life sinecure.20

But Neil was his father's son, and he too "did not consult his own ease" during the conflict. Neil fought hard, long, and well. He was most fortunate to learn his trade as
a section officer in a light artillery battery commanded by Captain John C. Tidball, a tough, competent professional who compiled a distinguished Civil War record and who went on to a long and solid career in the Gilded Age army. Light artillery during the Civil War was not positioned behind the lines, lobbing shells from a distance, "bringing tone and dignity to what would otherwise be an unseemly brawl," with its officers brandishing riding crops from folding chairs. During the mid-nineteenth century, light artillery went into battle on the front line, among the infantry, firing ball, bolt, grape, and cannon in flat trajectories. It was hot work. The men serving such batteries could not only inflict grievous damage upon an enemy if they were competent, but they became the chief targets of opposing gunners and riflemen as well. And it was skilled work. There was a great difference in effectiveness between a well-drilled battery and a sloppy one. Newsmen described Tidball's battery in an action along the Chickahominy River on May 23, 1862, as "so well drilled that the discharge was so rapid as to be almost continuous." Considering that this was a battery of only six guns, and that these were muzzle loaders and not breech loaders, that must be acknowledged a highly skilled performance.

But Neil was also a privileged young man, somewhat self-important and vain, who inherited keen ambition. On
leave in Washington, he wrote home to his mother boasting that he had stayed at the White House, no doubt on the strength of the family name. "The President and Mrs. Lincoln spoke highly of you and Pa." He also groused to Anne that he was not being promoted fast enough, and that less deserving acquaintances were advancing ahead of him. The Photographic History of the Civil War contains two photographs of Neil, both taken during the Peninsular Campaign while he was in Tidball's battery. They are most revealing as to Neil's character. In one, Tidball and his three section lieutenants are posed with one of their guns, fresh from battle. The carriage is still mud splattered, though the tube appears clean and the muzzle is free of powder residue—marks of professionalism. Tidball and two of his officers are dressed identically: practical kepi caps, simple soldier's tunics, swords for the photographer, and loose trouser bottoms outside their boot-tops. Neil Dennison is the sartorial standout. A jaunty wide-brimmed campaign hat, not a common kepi, is set at a rakish angle and nicely frames his dark good looks; a fine tunic is buttoned once high across the chest, and is then open about the hips in the Napoleonic fashion; and a magnificent pair of soft leather cavalry boots, with trousers tucked in and sporting fine silver spurs, extend well above his knees. A huge saber at his side, and a natty silk scarf tied loosely
about his neck, its ends free to the breeze, set off the ensemblé. While Tidball and the other two officers are staring camera-right, in the direction their gun is trained, Lt. Dennison alone gazes camera-left, so that his fine hat properly frames his best profile.

Yet there is nothing foppish about Neil Dennison's war record. He is mentioned in dispatches by his superiors for his exemplary performance at Mechanicsville, Chickahominy, Malvern Hill, Antietam where his horse is killed under him, and Culpepper. In July, 1863, Neil reported to the Department of the Cumberland as Inspector of Artillery (in modern terms, "getting his ticket punched" in a staff job). His superior was Colonel James Barnett, a well connected fellow Ohioan who had entered the war as commander of Governor Dennison's only battle-ready militia battery in 1861, and who was now Chief of Artillery of the department. Neil worked competently to improve the management and supply of the defensive heavy guns at Nashville, but he was disappointed in his assignment. He complained to his mother that he had not been promoted, and bemoaned that he should have listened to his father and stayed back East, since "this Army is no match for the Army of the Potomac." In September, Neil managed a re-assignment "at his own request" back to the Army of the Potomac, this time to every young artillery officer's dream job, that of battery commander.
Neil proudly wheeled his shiny new three-inch Parrott guns, Battery A, 2nd U.S. Artillery, into line of march with Brigadier General Wesley Merritt's Reserve Cavalry Brigade. The "boy general" soon had reason to be pleased with Lt. Dennison, describing him at Cold Harbor as "inimitable...always at the right place...anticipating orders."27 Heady stuff, and from one of the best soldiers of the war.

But Neil Dennison's greatest achievement came in July, 1864. On July 28, Battery A was part of the Second Cavalry Division, moving on Richmond, strung out on a road through heavy woods near the old Malvern Hill battlefield, when Brigadier General Henry E. Davies' First Brigade, in the lead, was surprised on its flank by Major General Joseph B. Kershaw's division of Confederates. Neil's was the only battery present that far forward, and went into action supporting Davies, who had dismounted, since the woods were too thick for mounted action. They held off the first attack, but the Rebs came back and forced Davies to retreat down the road to where the rest of the division had drawn up, and where Kershaw would be stopped. Neil sent five guns to the rear when informed of the withdrawal, but stayed behind himself, on his own initiative, with one gun to cover the rear guard. As the Rebel yells closed on his position, Neil limbered his last gun and prepared to fall
back, but the wheel and swing horses were killed, as was his own second mount of the day. He rallied a group of cavalrymen to defend his gun, but the Rebs drove him off and gleefully snaked the tube away through the grass by the prolonge, leaving the broken carriage for Neil and his band to recapture.28

After the battle, Neil joined Davies at the aid station for treatment of minor wounds. Losing a gun in battle is a mortal sin for an artilleryman, but the subsequent investigation not only cleared Neil of culpability, but found his action that day laudatory. Young Dennison had covered himself in glory, and the rewards poured in. He was promoted no less than three times for this action, once to permanent captain in the regular army, once to major by brevet, and again to lieutenant colonel by brevet, all within a month.29 Mother and Pa must have been proud.

When the war ended, Neil reverted to his permanent grade of captain and remained in the Army. He had achieved an excellent war record and enjoyed the courtesy of being called "Colonel" in conversation, as befitted his very real accomplishments. He was one of comparatively few Union men who had fought continuously throughout the war. And he was in the right clique of the regular army, that of Phil Sheridan and U. S. Grant. He had only to keep his nose clean to sail through an honorable career as a Gilded Age soldier. But that was not to be.
In 1867, Neil landed a prestigious assignment. He was selected as commander of a company of artillerymen, part of the first contingent of soldiers to take possession of Alaska from Imperial Russia following the purchase of the territory. As the senior line officer, Neil got the best posting: garrison commander at Sitka. But Sitka turned out to be no real prize for a pampered and patrician young man. Life was boring and rustic, and soon the long, dark, bitterly cold winter descended like a pall.

And Neil had no experience with garrison life. Although it cannot be confirmed, it is likely that none of his officers, nor perhaps any of his noncommissioned officers, had much either. Four hard years of war are not good training for such duties. Moreover, the private soldiers were most likely raw recruits. Discipline deteriorated rapidly, as no one, particularly not Neil whose duty it was to know better, bothered to figure out ways to keep the troops occupied. The men behaved as soldiers will in such circumstances, and the sparse little village of Sitka was soon overrun with blue-coats grubbing for whiskey and women. The result was one of the most disgraceful performances in the annals of the United States Army, culminating in open shooting between soldiers and Indians over women and drink.
Neil's personal behavior deteriorated as well. He took to frequenting various business establishments in Sitka, and to drinking heavily there, even becoming involved in an altercation with a disgruntled soldier, probably one of his own men, who took a shot at him. Neil owed his life to the standard of training of his detachment—the man missed. But the low point of Captain Dennison's conduct came in April, 1870, when, probably intoxicated, he sent a Aleut servant boy to the home of an attractive young woman who had caught his eye, with the message, as the lad later testified, "Tell Julia Kuschunoff to come to my room and I will give her five dollars." 32

But Julia Kuschunoff was not a soldier's woman. She was a girl of fifteen, living at home with her parents, the daughter of one of a handful of Russian nationals who had chosen to remain in Alaska, and the apple of her father's eye. The elder Kuschunoff complained indignantly to Brigadier General Jefferson C. Davis, Military Governor of Alaska Territory, and Neil found himself before a court-martial. Davis can be faulted as a commander for not intervening before matters came to such a pass, but when Captain Dennison's conduct became a public disgrace he piled on charges. Not only was Neil charged with conduct unbecoming an officer for the Julia Kuschunoff mess, but with several other minor matters that would ordinarily be
dealt with administratively. The verdict was guilty of one minor charge having to do with accounting for the company's welfare funds and innocent of all other charges and specifications. Yet all the lurid details remained in the court-martial paperwork as it worked its way up the chain of command to Army headquarters in Washington by December, 1870, for final review. No doubt rumors flew as the tongues of clerks and aides wagged. The sentence was only a reprimand, but the conviction itself carried far more stigma than that. Neil faced disgrace, and the end of his military career.

William and Anne rallied to their first-born's defense. Anne traveled to Washington to be with Neil, and to energize the petticoat chain of command on behalf of her handsome war hero. Dennison enlisted family intimate Garfield, now a member of Congress, to lobby General-in-Chief Sheridan on Neil's behalf. In the end, Neil was allowed to resign quietly, and the matter was hushed up. Neil returned to Columbus to study law with his father's partners, and soon recovered his savoir-vivre. In December 1871, he married Mary C. Halderman of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a beautiful and talented woman who became the toast of charity theatricals in Columbus society. Neil was admitted to the bar, and Dennison secured him a job as Secretary of the Columbus Iron Company. But rumors remained, as the family was rocked with tragedy again.
A Death in the Family:

On April 18, 1873, U. S. Navy Lieutenant Erasmus Dennison shot himself to death in San Francisco.35

The second son of Anne and William Dennison to reach adulthood, Erasmus had been a bright and likable child. With Neil fighting in the war, ex-Governor Dennison had pulled strings mightily to secure a coveted appointment to the Naval Academy at Newport for 16-year old Erasmus in 1863. The lad passed lightly through the Academy, his ease, poise, and popularity with his classmates befitting a sprig of the Western nobility. Academically, Erasmus was less than stellar, graduating 80 out of 87 in the Class of 1867, and was commissioned an ensign in 1868. He soon married the young widow of another naval officer, and his career was well launched.36

1873 found Erasmus a deck officer on the USS Saranac, a coastal steamer home-ported in San Francisco. On his gentlemanly second try, he had earned his prized master's rating, allowing him to command at sea, and he had been promoted to lieutenant. His wife Lissette and their two small children had joined him in San Francisco, and their happiness seemed complete.37 Erasmus was a privileged young man of poise and refinement, and his future glistened.
But the separations of service life have ever been hard on marriages, and there were many distractions for a bright and wealthy young couple in 1870s San Francisco. Soon tensions arose in the Dennison household. Upon returning from a cruise on April 17, Lt. Dennison was confronted by a lawyer hired by his wife to bring suit for divorce. Erasmus was devastated. Divorce was unthinkable in his world. It meant shame and disgrace, it would stigmatize his children, and it could well end his career. Above all, it branded him a failure as a husband. The distraught young man sought solace in the company of one Mrs. Pleasant, a friend and proprietress of a local rooming house. He ranted and raged, brandished his service revolver, and threatened his own life and that of Lissette as well. No doubt experienced dealing with young hotheads, Mrs. Pleasant neatly disarmed Erasmus and cooled his temper enough to solicit the aid of mutual friends to approach Lissette in hopes of negotiating a reconciliation. Meanwhile, an outwardly calm Erasmus busied himself writing two letters, one to his wife and another to his father. When informed by his friends that Lissette had refused to open her door to them, Erasmus retrieved his revolver, strode to a back bedroom, lay on the floor, and put a bullet through his head.38

William and Anne received the news via the new transcontinental telegraph, and retreated within their home at 195
North High Street in shocked disbelief. But their grief was not to remain private. An upstart newspaper in Columbus, The Sunday Morning News, practiced the new brand of journalism sweeping the nation, aimed at wide popular circulation fed by sensational stories in place of the staid political tracts of earlier days. The Sunday Morning News got wind of Erasmus' suicide via the same transcontinental telegraph, and obtained all the lurid details from San Francisco's Alta Californian. San Francisco police had responded to the incident and had impounded Erasmus' two letters, but confidentiality was not respected and the letters were leaked to the press. "Love me as you used to love me...I have killed myself so that our little ones shall not suffer...I have been true to you in action...your enemies and mine have done this thing." To the mortification of the proud, patrician Dennisons, Erasmus' agonized ramblings to Lissette were gleefully reprinted in Columbus for all to read. Polite and sober defenses of Erasmus' character in the establishment press did little to ease the family's anguish. And even The New York Times chimed in with its own bit of yellow journalism, suggesting in an eight-line squib that Erasmus had identified his own father, the ex-Governor, as chief among "your enemies and mine."
The immediate effect of the tragedy was to spoil the wedding of daughter Anna to Herbert R. Smith, less than a month away. As leading members of Columbus society, the Dennisons had planned a lavish wedding at Trinity Episcopal Church. They crafted an extensive guest list, including many prominent politicians and businessmen important to William Dennison's aspirations. It would not have quite the cachet of the May Parsons wedding of 1871, when the daughter of a prominent Columbus family wed a European prince in Trinity, complete with uniforms and tiara, but Anne was determined that it should be the highlight of the 1873 social season. Now all that was impossible. Regrets poured in, and it was clear that few, if any, dignitaries would attend the wedding. "Not sent due to the suicide of their son" appears in Rutherford B. Hayes' handwriting on the back of a congratulatory letter. Stern fellow Episcopalians Rutherford and Lucy Hayes would not brook this family weakness and shame among their co-religionists. Herman Dennison, now an attorney in practice with his father, was sent west by rail to bring his brother's remains home. Anna and Herbert were married in a small private ceremony in the Dennisons' High Street home and the young couple was ushered quietly out of town. A few days later, another quiet ceremony was conducted in that same parlor in place of a church funeral, and Erasmus Dennison, with his sword on his
casket and borne by loyal shipmates, was conveyed directly to Greenlawn Cemetery.41

Another Indignity:

Francis Hurtt was one of a multitude of industrious, avaricious, self-centered, and small-minded men who saw the Civil War as only a way to enrich themselves. A partner in the Ohio State Journal—the major Republican organ in Columbus—when the war began, Hurtt saw opportunities to make money as a quartermaster in the army and secured an appointment as a captain. One of the men who helped him get the appointment was Governor William Dennison. Hurtt soon turned to various skulduggeries to line his pockets at public expense, including funneling purchasing contracts for hay and horses through the Journal's business manager. Hurtt retained controlling interest in the Journal while he was in the service, giving him no small influence in Republican political circles. When he began to connive with contacts among the "Ohio gang" in Washington to have his immediate superior, the departmental quartermaster in Cincinnati, relieved and himself appointed, Major General Ambrose E. Burnside, commanding the Department of the Ohio, ordered an investigation. Eventually, after additional underhandedness aimed at frustrating the inquiry, Hurtt was tried by court-martial in January, 1864, and convicted of various offenses. Sentenced to be dismissed from service,
fined, and imprisoned for a year, Hurtt politicked to have the prison sentence quashed during review, paid his fine, and returned to his various private pursuits in Ohio.\(^2\)

The tumultuous final year of the war diverted public attention in the matter and for years nothing more was heard of it, but by 1874 the Grant Administration was riddled with scandal, and political opponents were on the lookout more eagerly than ever for ways to keep the political pot boiling. The Hurtt matter surfaced again in Cincinnati Democratic newspapers that year, and an astonished William Dennison saw his name linked to the scandal. The transcript of the court-martial materialized, and it revealed that Hurtt had written his editor at the *Journal*, Isaac J. Allen, asking Allen to employ Dennison, then in private practice and no longer in government, to travel to Washington and lobby the "Ohio gang" to have Captain John H. Dickerson, the chief quartermaster at Cincinnati, relieved and Hurtt given his job. "We can well afford to pay Dennison's expenses to Washington," wrote Hurtt. "Please telegraph me if he will go immediately."\(^3\) Allen replied that Dennison refused the assignment, though he believed that the ex-governor was sympathetic.\(^4\) There was no love lost between Dennison and the professionals of the Quartermaster Corps, a legacy of his governorship, and he may well have indicated that new blood would be
beneficial. But Dennison was too smart a politician to get close to a scheme like that.

Dennison was incensed by the unexpected publicity in the spring of 1874. He railed to Garfield that he had been unfairly treated, and asked for a government investigation to clear his name. He published an open letter in the Columbus press defending his involvement and denying any impropriety. The national press picked up the story, and the tone of The New York Times coverage was representative of the establishment Republican line; Dennison, as well as John Sherman and Salmon P. Chase, also implicated by Hurtt, were innocent bystanders in the criminal conspiracies of Hurtt and his cronies. The Columbus Daily Dispatch was more sensational; "The soldiers marched and died, naked, hungry, and forsaken, but...Hurtt 'made money'."45

The Hurtt imbroglio was in truth a minor affair, it soon blew over, and Dennison's wounded outrage was an overreaction. But, except for the uninformed and vitriolic criticism of his management of the initial state war effort as governor, which was being refuted by chroniclers of the conflict by 1874, Dennison had never before been linked to personal wrongdoing in public. And Dennison was convinced that his association with Hurtt, just like his conduct as governor, was just and blameless. In early 1874, Dennison's misfortunes weighed heavily upon him. He had lost his
personal fortune, he had been rejected by his party, the
cconduct of his sons had brought scandal and tragedy to his
family, and now this. It was his darkest hour.

But just as things seemed bleakest, it appeared that old
friendships and kindnesses brought new hope. A message
arrived from President Ulysses S. Grant. William Dennison
had been appointed Commissioner of the District of
Columbia.
ENDNOTES

CHAPTER IX


Bonadio, "Contempt of All Unity," 92; Roseboom, *Civil War Era*, 465-467, 474.


19 History of Franklin and Pickaway Counties (William Brothers, Publishers, 1880), 94; Rocky Mountain News, January 1, 1905.


23 W. Neil Dennison to Anne Dennison, undated, William Neil Dennison Collection, The Ohio Historical Society.

24 W. Neil Dennison to Anne Dennison, July 30, 1863, W. Neil Dennison Collection; Miller and Lanier, Photographic History, 283.

25 W. Neil Dennison to Anne Dennison, July 30, 1863, W. Neil Dennison Collection.


Ibid.


Trinity Church Parish Record, Columbus, Ohio, Book 2; Sunday Morning News, Columbus, Ohio, April 27, 1873; Thomas G. Phelps, Captain, USN, to George M. Robeson, Secretary of the Navy, April 21, 1873, National Archives, Washington, D.C.


Sunday Morning News, April 27, 1873; Record of Officers, GR 45, M 330, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Sunday Morning News, ibid.

Sunday Morning News, May 4, 1873.

Sunday Morning News, April 27, 1873; Trinity Parish Records, Book 2, April, 1873; The New York Times, April 20, 1873; Ohio State Journal, April 26, 1873.
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45 *Columbus Daily Dispatch*, 28 March 1874; *New York Times*, March 19, 1874; *Columbus Dispatch*, March 28, 1874.
CHAPTER X
"CALUMNIATIONS SILENCED FOREVER"

The Washington to which William Dennison returned in the summer of 1874 was much different from the one he came to as Postmaster General almost a decade earlier. Gone were the ugly fortifications, munitions dumps, legions of soldiers, scores of shed hospitals, and the apprehensions of wartime. The fetid Washington Canal had been filled in and planted over. The few torpid streams afloat with filth that had crossed the city were now diverted into new sewers. Extensive grading and terracing had been completed, improving the natural drainage of the land. Major Pierre C. L'Enfant's grand design for the city, although never fully realized, had left a legacy of wide rights-of-way for streets, which had been transformed from mud holes with open drainage into boulevards lined with young flowering shade trees, bordered by sidewalks, and paved with concrete, macadam, brick, stone, and wood. Many of these streets were also lined with the elegant new private homes of high government officials, diplomats, and businessmen. New traffic circles ornamented by fountains and public benches graced several intersections, and the many open
spaces, where a few years before soldiers tented and cattle grazed, were now wide public greenswards alive with trees and flowers.\textsuperscript{1}

District Commissioner:

It was this very transformation in the nation's capital that prompted a beleaguered President Ulysses S. Grant to send for William Dennison. Past courtesies and loyalty to his friends were very important to Grant and might have been a minor reason for selecting Dennison. Yet it is unlikely that sympathy for Dennison's recent political, financial, and family troubles had much, if anything, to do with the selection. Grant most likely chose Dennison because he sorely needed a faithful party man with an impeccable reputation for honesty and incorruptibility who was willing to take a thankless job.\textsuperscript{2} To Dennison, smarting from his recent troubles, the President's offer meant welcome personal income and a chance for himself, his wife Anne, and their younger children to get out of Columbus, which would allow the family's unwanted notoriety to fade. For a man who aspired to be Vice President two years before, the job of Commissioner of the District of Columbia was a substantial comedown, but it had just enough cachet for Dennison to swallow his pride and grasp it gratefully.

Dennison may not have been so grateful when he learned what the job entailed. Washington's splendid metamorphosis,
from a miserable little village in a swamp to the lovely city of 1874, had come amid great cost, controversy, and corruption. The resultant outcry rocked the Grant Administration, energized the Democrats, and led to a revolt in Congress against the President in which the old popularly elected municipal governments within the District were abolished and a new one instituted. The District was now to be governed by a board of three commissioners, appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. As one of these commissioners, Dennison's job was to sort out the financial mess, set up clean government, and quench the political fire under the President.

The major source of that heat had been the activities of Alexander R. Shepherd, a flamboyant, backslapping, larger-than-life empresario who had risen to prominence in the former municipal government on the strength of a dream of civic splendor. Shepherd traveled the East, visiting major cities, familiarizing himself with construction, design, materials, and other aspects of public works. He then launched into an ambitious scheme to transform Washington from an eyesore into a civic wonder to match the great capitals of Europe. In large measure he succeeded. But Shepherd's cavalier attitude towards the public purse had resulted in a huge municipal debt and widespread corruption, both in the administration of contracts and within
the municipal government itself. Various unsavory characters profited as middlemen between the municipality and its contractors, often leading to final costs more than twice the true value of the improvement. The names of phantom workers embellished payrolls; bills were paid more than once; kickbacks were commonplace; and underhandedness and skullduggery ran rampant. Some projects were completed with unsatisfactory materials or to unsound designs, often because of corruption but sometimes because promising though untried methods and materials proved ineffective. Later, Dennison and his fellow commissioners found themselves replacing some rotted pavement within less than a decade of its installation. Throughout all this, Shepherd proudly pointed to his lovely new city and downplayed or denied the corruption. He cultivated a close association with his old wartime General-in-Chief who was now President. And Grant was a man loath to entertain criticism of anyone who had once gained his confidence.4

Righteous indignation over corruption was not the only reason for the Congressional assault upon Shepherd, the President, and the Washington municipal government. In 1867, shortly after Dennison left the Cabinet and well before the Fifteenth Amendment of 1870 was ratified, a Congress dominated by Radical Republicans passed a bill over President Andrew Johnson's veto giving the vote to
black residents of the District of Columbia. As a result, Washington—which had been a magnet for black Americans during the Civil War—now drew even more, ex-slaves and not, from the North as well as the South, seeking economic opportunity and civil liberty. Washington had been a Southern town in 1861, with slavery and other Southern social structures, but the change by 1874 was revolutionary. A few black Congressmen from Reconstruction states formed the social pinnacle of a substantial black population, with a nascent middle class bolstered by steady jobs in government, and representing a sizable voting block in municipal elections. Beholden to the Republicans, this block was a major source of strength for the Shepherd regime. The corruption scandals surrounding Shepherd and his cronies combined with racial backlash among Democrats and former Confederate sympathizers to re-energize the Democrats. Democratic gains in Congress by the early 1870s reflected parallel advances by Democrats in state and local elections across the former Union states. Persistent rejection by the Ohio legislature of a voting rights amendment to the Ohio Constitution did not go unnoticed in Washington, and further strengthened the Democrats. The Shepherd scandals sufficiently weakened Congressional support for the municipal government to permit the Democrats to win passage of a bill in 1874 abolishing the
old popularly elected municipal governments of the District and replacing them with an appointed commission. In their zeal to take away the vote from black Washingtonians, the Democrats had effectively disenfranchised all the city's citizens, and substituted virtual representation by Congress.

Loyal to his friends and blind to their shortcomings, Grant nominated Shepherd as a commissioner of the new government. Furious, the Senate rejected Shepherd 36 votes to 6, with many Republicans voting in the majority. An indignant Grant capitulated and, in the end, the choices were William Dennison of Ohio, Henry T. Blow, a former Congressman from Missouri, and John H. Ketcham of New York.

The new commissioners convened in the summer of 1874 to find that even their offices had been looted by the crooks and scalawags of the ancien régime. One stalwart city councilman was caught leaving the cleaned-out council chamber on his last day in office with a city-owned feather duster protruding from his trouser leg. But such minor annoyances soon gave way to recognition by the new commissioners of the scope of their task. Shepherd had spent money freely, knowing that in the end Congress must make good his obligations. Congress now demanded that the commissioners carry much of the resulting debt from
municipal revenues. In consequence, taxes were raised and special assessments were levied upon property owners whose holdings abutted city improvements, and howls of indignation erupted. Shortage of revenues also caused the commissioners to refuse some needed improvements to the segregated colored school system. The scandals over improvements contracts were slowly sorted out over the next four years, and the Corps of Engineers took over management of much of the remaining real property improvement program for the District.7

His fellow Commissioners came and went during the next four years, but William Dennison remained, as serene and as patrician as ever. The scanty commission records for the period that survive in the National Archives give scarce clues as to Dennison's daily involvement in municipal affairs. He signed little correspondence, and that only on routine matters. The Commissioners apparently kept few records of their private deliberations. But the newspaper record reveals an outcome not unlike that of Dennison's tenure as Postmaster General. District government was well managed during Dennison's term. Municipal finances were placed on a sound footing, civic improvements continued, though at a much more modest pace, and there was little scandal, none involving Dennison himself.8 There can be no doubt that, in spite of being "frittered in polish,"
Dennison was a competent administrator. He was also an honest man. Yet it is ironic that the incorruptible Dennison, the brave Republican who stood firm for his party's principles in the dark opening days of the Civil War, the staunch champion of "the three Amendments," would have served in a cause that compromised civil liberties to political expediency. And he would do so again.

The Contested Election:

The Dennisons moved happily back to Washington, and were soon ensconced in elegant quarters at the corner of I and 21st Streets. Wealthy brother-in-law Robert E. Neil and his family resided at nearby "Hill House" and were also prominent members of the Ohio Gang or "The United States of Ohio," as social lioness Marian Grouverneur called the cabal of influential Ohioans that held sway in the capital. Youngest daughter Jenny passed her late teenage years in Washington as the belle of society, and conquered her elders and contemporaries alike with charm and stunning good looks. Anne may have taken cold satisfaction in the social decline of her longtime rival as grand dame of the Ohio Gang, Kate Chase Sprague, after the death of Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase and after Kate's adulterous affair with Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York became a public scandal. Neil and Herman remained in Columbus, Alen enrolled at Princeton, and lively domesticity once again graced the Dennison household.
William Dennison was less content with his public life. The District Commission was a small pond, and the ocean of national politics was omnipresent and irresistible. The Democrats gained control of the House in 1874 for the first time since before the Civil War and Dennison feared for the gains of his founding generation of Republicans should "the rebels return to power." Dennison returned to the role of party insider, conciliator, facilitator, and honest broker that he had played so well earlier in his career, as he did what he could to keep the Republican Party from breaking under the many pressures of a new age. But for the most part his were small efforts of modest significance.

Dennison played a minor part as intermediary between President Grant and old friend Secretary of the Treasury Benjamin H. Bristow when Grant turned on Bristow for pursuing the trail of the Whiskey Ring conspirators to Grant's private secretary, Orville E. Babcock. In June, 1876, Bristow and James G. Blaine were rivals for the Republican nomination for President to succeed Grant. A Kentucky newspaper published an insinuation that Bristow's marriage had been rushed due to the bride's condition, and Bristow blamed Blaine for the slander, leading to a fiery confrontation and a well-timed swoon by Blaine on the floor of Congress. Dennison leaped into the fray as conciliator, arranging a meeting between the adversaries, and releasing
to the press a convoluted "Dennisonianism" that tried to say all was well between them, but which only made Dennison sound like a prig. Later in June, Dennison attended the Republican National Convention in Cincinnati, but he had no official position there. No longer a member of the Ohio Republican Central Committee, Dennison was not a delegate. He telegraphed his congratulations to Ohioan Rutherford B. Hayes for winning the nomination, and officiously implied that he was working with the New York delegation on the selection of a running mate, but it is most likely that William Dennison was only a pompous bystander.11

With the contest in November between Hayes and Democrat Samuel J. Tilden, Dennison's role as a Washington insider was suddenly enhanced and, for a brief moment, his ambition soared once again. Tilden seemed to have a modest but clear lead in the popular vote the morning after the election, and the Democrats appeared destined to hold both the White House and the House of Representatives, a stunning reversal for the Republicans. But Republican insiders saw a glimmer of hope for winning in the Electoral College. Particularly in Louisiana and Florida, the Republican party organization remained strong, bolstered by Reconstruction regimes in state government. These states, South Carolina and one district in Oregon presented conflicting slates of Electoral College delegates, and it was up to Congress to
sort out the competing claims. An extraordinary joint commission was appointed consisting of equal numbers of Senators and Representatives, equally divided by party, and five justices of the Supreme Court. All votes taken by the commission were along strict party lines, and the Supreme Court justices proved to be Republicans three to two. By March 1877, the commission had decided in favor of enough Hayes delegates to give the Ohioan the Presidency by 185 electoral votes to 184. At 3:55 A.M. on the morning of March 2, 1877, the House and Senate convened in joint session. The members were exhausted from days of non-stop politicking; the air was thick with strong tobacco, stale sweat, and whiskey; tensions were electric as rumors of a coup flew about the city; a squad of armed plainclothesmen stood nervously around the podium as cries of "shoot" came from the gallery; and many Democrats walked out as Rutherford Birchard Hayes was proclaimed President of the United States of America.12

But all of this public activity came after continuous and byzantine back-stage political machinations by both sides in which Dennison played a part. Dennison was in Ohio to vote on November 7 and spent part of the evening with Hayes and his family in their home as the returns came in. Things looked grim as Dennison entrained for Washington the next day and pondered what to do when he arrived. Dennison
was by no means "Mr. Ohio" in 1876 Washington, as he may have been for a short time during the last year of the Lincoln Administration. Senator John Sherman was now clearly "Mr. Ohio," with Congressman James A. Garfield his major rival. But Dennison was a trusted senior member of the Ohio Gang and enjoyed a well deserved reputation for honesty. One modern scholar of the period identifies Dennison as one of the Republican "visiting statesmen" who traveled to the contested states in late November in an attempt to influence the vote count, but Dennison's own correspondence places him in Washington and Columbus during that time. Dennison acted as a liaison between Hayes, Sherman, and other Republican insiders, traveling between Washington and Columbus with private intelligence, as Hayes elected to remain in Columbus and said little publicly during the crisis. When not conferring with one camp or the other, Dennison sent several long telegrams and letters to Hayes with his own assessment of the political situation. These reports were careful, astute, and remarkably accurate.

Dennison made an embarrassing blunder in late November, however. The Washington Nation published a story based on an interview in which Dennison was purported to have said that Hayes should withdraw from the contest! Dennison was furious and immediately put out a correction insisting that
he had said Hayes had won the election fairly, that only fraud could keep Hayes from getting the necessary electoral votes, and that Hayes was too honorable a man to accept the office through fraud. The Nation's reporter did not quote Dennison directly in his article, so it is unclear whether it was a misunderstanding of some tortured Dennisonianism or a deliberate attempt to misrepresent Dennison, but the damage was done. Hayes dashed off a confidential letter to Sherman instructing that only Sherman be his spokesman in Washington during the crisis.14

Nevertheless, Dennison persisted. His confidential reports to Hayes continued as well as his meetings in Washington with Sherman, Garfield, and other Republican insiders to plot strategy. In December Dennison wrote to Hayes suggesting that some Southern politicians could be split from the Democrats on the election crisis in return for a promise by Hayes of "fair treatment" of the South during a Hayes presidency. "Fair treatment" was a code phrase for ending Reconstruction and acquiescing in the re-establishment of Southern white control over state governments. By no means was Dennison the originator of this idea, and others may have discussed it with Hayes before Dennison, but the tone of Dennison's letter indicates that he had reluctantly come to support the position as long as "it does not compromise your convictions."15
But it must have been an uncomfortable stand for William Dennison, the stalwart founding member of the Republican Party, and the outspoken defender of "the three Amendments."

On the evening of February 26, 1877, Dennison accompanied John Sherman to a meeting in the Wormley Hotel with Democratic representatives from Louisiana and Florida. Garfield was also there, along with other influential politicos. Garfield boasted to his diary that he made but a short speech and then left. It was clear to the Southerners that it was Sherman who represented Hayes, and it was Sherman they wanted to hear. But, according to subsequent Congressional testimony, it was Dennison who broached the fateful bargain, withdrawal of Reconstruction forces from all of the South in return for supporting Hayes. Sherman subsequently affirmed the offer. The deal was done, and Hayes was President.

A wealth of modern scholarship makes it clear that the Wormley Affair was but a minor episode in a much broader arrangement between the new Southern white elites—"the Redeemers"—and Northern Republicans. Other parts of the bargain, worked out in other venues and not all honored, included a Southerner in the Hayes cabinet, the House Speakership for Garfield, federal aid for Southern railroads and other public works, and more patronage jobs
for Southern whites. But the Wormley Affair remains the quintessential inside deal of Gilded Age politics, and the essence of the shady bargain. Dennison had been but a horse-holder in the action, but he felt soiled by it.

Dennison had served his party during the election crisis out of a sense of duty and from the strong conviction that all that was good and noble in the achievements of his generation of Republicans rode on the outcome. It would be unfair to Dennison to suggest that he served in expectation of political reward. On the other hand, Dennison approached Hayes' right-hand-man in Columbus, James A. Comly, in February about a position in Hayes' cabinet. It is not clear what job he sought, though Dennison had aspired since the early 1860s to be Secretary of War. But Dennison had no chance for such an appointment. Hayes had already floated among his intimates a short list of possible cabinet appointees, and the only Ohioan on it was Sherman. There could hardly be more than one Ohioan in the cabinet of a Ohio president, and when John Sherman was announced for Secretary of the Treasury, Dennison knew he was out of the running. Dennison was never in the running. Hayes belonged to a new generation of Republicans, to whom Dennison personified old ideas and old ways.

Dennison continued in his job as Commissioner of the District, though he became increasingly unhappy with life
in Washington. The bill establishing the Commission was due to expire in the summer of 1878, and it was likely that his job would be abolished. There were no offers of an appointment of any sort in the Hayes Administration, not even a consular post abroad which Dennison may well have accepted. Dennison was hurt and offended by President Hayes' somewhat cavalier treatment of him after the election, leading Dennison to feel, with some justification, that he had been used up and thrown away. His influence in Washington seemed to have faded. In May, 1878, William Dennison resigned as Commissioner of the District of Columbia. In a letter to an old friend about the reasons for his resignation, he said he was glad he had not been involved "in the Florida or Louisiana affair," and that he was also glad he had not been a visiting statesman.19 During the deliberations of the election commission in 1877, Dennison had written that he feared the machinations of the Republican visiting statesmen in Louisiana might "produce disgust in the minds of the Republican judges."20 Dennison also maintained to his friend in May 1878 that he had never asked Hayes for a job, which may have been technically correct, but Dennison's own correspondence makes it clear that he asked Comly for one. He added: "I...have lost some of my personal interest in [Hayes]...for reasons I cannot write about."21
In the midst of this disappointment, tragedy struck the Dennison household once again. Young Perry, 12 years old, was visiting his aunt and uncle in Columbus in May while his parents wound up affairs in Washington, when he came down suddenly with typhoid fever. Dennison and Anne barely had time to rush to Perry's side before he died on June 5, 1878.22

The Last Act:

Press reactions to William Dennison's resignation were flattering. "Sincere, honest, manly, and courageous," was one description of him; "it will be a matter of congratulation if [Dennison can be] replaced by as good a man," was another.23 The public explanation that he wished to return to private law practice was generally accepted, and there was no public or private hint of the occasional shortness of breath, lightheadedness, and the constant discomfort that were by this time no doubt alerting Dennison to his own mortality.

Dennison opened a law office in the Deshler Building in downtown Columbus, and the family moved into a fashionable new home at 284 North Park Street. He did not solicit a wide public law practice, spending most of his time tending to his private affairs. Dennison was soon invited to resume his seat on the Central Committee of the Ohio Republican Party and was welcomed as an elder statesman at the state convention in June 1878.24
But still another episode of family trouble remained to plague William Dennison's fading years. Son Neil was still in Columbus, but no longer working for the Columbus Iron Company nor at another job with the Columbus and Hocking Valley Railroad that his father's influence had secured. Rather, Neil was in private law practice, though not quite the sort of practice that Mother and Pa expected. "W. Neil Dennison, Attorney-at-Law," was the newspaper box advertisement in the Ohio State Journal that greeted the elder Dennisons upon their return to Columbus, "Collections Promptly Attended To."25

Neil was also a Columbus City Councilman representing the 7th Ward. And Neil Dennison was a Democrat! By 1879 Neil had resigned his Council seat and launched a campaign for mayor of Columbus on the Democratic ticket. It was a rowdy campaign, with boisterous toughs breaking up opposition rallies and no-holds-barred, bare-knuckle politicking in the best Gilded Age style. But Neil's weaknesses of the flesh became the major campaign issue. Neil was unwise enough, or uncaring enough, to be seen heading a gang of toughs intimidating black voters, carousing in disreputable parts of town, and generally acting un-mayorlike. The Republicans put up a reform businessman, Gilbert C. Collins, as Neil's opponent, who had only to utter a few platitudes from the high ground and watch Neil dig his own
political grave. The city was treated to the spectacle of its Democratic newspaper leading the fight against its Democratic candidate for mayor. "The less said about [Neil's] personal habits, the better," wrote the editor of The Columbus Dispatch. Not-so-veiled hints of gambling, drunkenness, womanizing, and general debauchery led the Dispatch to label Neil "a bummer,...not the proper person to be mayor." And dark hints of Alaska surfaced, with the Dispatch suggesting that the voters send Neil back to the frozen North.26

Neil lost in a landslide and was soon off to Colorado and the more hospitable environs of the frontier mining boom towns, leaving wife Mary and his small children behind. Dennison and Anne must have been devastated. This time, the estrangement between Neil and his parents was formidable, particularly in the case of Anne. As a widow in later years, Anne disinherited her first born in favor of his children. But William Dennison never completely forsook his son, regardless of the pain he had caused him. In September 1880, Dennison wrote wistfully, almost plaintively, to old friend James Garfield who was campaigning for the Presidency at the time, asking for a letter of introduction to help Neil build up his struggling law practice in Colorado. Neil went on to campaign, as a Republican, for Garfield in the 1880 election and was
rewarded with an appointment as Assistant U.S. Attorney in Denver.27

William Dennison persisted in his role as a political insider, and was honored with the permanent chair of the Republican state convention in May 1879. As the election of 1880 approached, Dennison felt impelled to become active and outspoken once again in political life. The Democrats now controlled both houses of Congress and Dennison was alarmed. He sensed a conspiracy among the Democrats to repeal the Fourteenth Amendment. Dennison also feared that the Democrats intended to fund the Confederate war debt, pension Confederate veterans, and compensate former slave-owners for the loss of their slaves. He believed that the Democrats intended to pack the Supreme Court by creating a host of new seats filled by Democrats, thereby preventing the Court from interfering with their grand design, and he pointed out that only the presidency stood in their way. Dennison took to the stump in the summer and fall of 1880 for the first time in many years, arguing his views, and calling the faithful to the defense of their ideals lest the sacrifice of the fallen have been in vain. The salt-and-pepper hair was now all white, the step was halting and painful as his illnesses progressed, the jowls were puffy, and the old reticence and aloofness was now deepened by the grim face of pain, as William Dennison fought the good
fight for the last time. Yes, he waived the bloody shirt, and perhaps his fears were exaggerated, but the texts of Dennison's speeches convey the impression of a well-informed man acting from conviction.

William Dennison had one last act to play on the political stage. In June 1880, he was chair of the Ohio delegation to the Republican National Convention in Chicago. Originally a leader of the John Sherman-for-President movement, Dennison watched U. S. Grant, Sherman, and Blaine deadlock on the first ballot, and the convention drift into stalemate as it became clear that passions were high and that all sides refused to budge. In early balloting, Grant and Blaine controlled over seventy percent of the votes, but neither could gain a majority, and Sherman had enough of the remaining votes to control the outcome. But there was no mood for compromise. Only on the thirty-fourth ballot did Wisconsin delegates break and cast 16 votes for dark horse James Garfield, who feebly protested that he was not in nomination, but who was overruled by the chair. In subsequent ballots, Dennison watched as state after state jumped on the Garfield bandwagon and incredulously, on the thirty-sixth poll, a small group of disaffected New York delegates defied their chairman and party boss Roscoe Conkling, deserted Grant, and put Garfield over the top. Dennison was elated. Garfield was a long-time
intimate, a close family friend and, most of all, an Ohio man. If he could not have Sherman, Dennison was more than content with Garfield. And Dennison had not been forced to deal with a fight within his own delegation between Garfield and Sherman supporters in which he would be expected to stick with Sherman, as the issue had been decided before Ohio was called.

While Garfield stood quietly at his seat among the Ohio delegates, shaking hands and accepting congratulations, William Dennison painfully elbowed his way through the crowd to the New York delegation, looking for Conkling. Dennison knew that the active support of the powerful New York Republican machine was critical to Garfield's hopes of victory in November, and that by tradition the champions of the second-place finisher, in this case Grant, got to choose the second spot on the ticket. Conkling received Dennison coolly but listened as the Ohioan proposed that New York could have the Vice Presidential nomination. Conkling agreed to call a caucus later that afternoon.30

Chester A. Arthur, head of the powerful New York City political machine and a Conkling lieutenant, quickly got wind of Dennison's offer. One source suggests that it was Dennison himself who approached Arthur and suggested that Arthur pursue the nomination, but that cannot be verified. Arthur did confront his chairman before the caucus and
declared that he wanted the second place on the ticket, only to be rebuffed by an angry Conkling who was still smarting from the loss of the top spot for Grant. And Dennison may have acted without prior consultation with Garfield, who had separately put out feelers to Levi P. Morton of New York. Fortunately for Dennison, Morton refused the offer but, when he did check back with the Ohio camp, Dennison found that not all of the delegation was willing to support Arthur in light of the New Yorker's difficulties with President Hayes and the recent corruption scandal in the New York Customs House. Dennison somewhat sheepishly sought out Conkling in the New York caucus room and confessed that he could not deliver all Ohio votes for Arthur. "Sir, I am not surprised at anything from Ohio," was the reply.31

Arthur won the support of his delegation, Dennison seconded his nomination on the floor, and the hefty New York machine politician was nominated.32 In his final act in American politics, William Dennison had been an unwitting kingmaker.

After the convention, a solicitous John Sherman persuaded Dennison to accept a yacht cruise on the Chesapeake, "for his constitution." To those who looked closely, Dennison was clearly ill. To the more callous, he seemed more aloof and pompous than ever. "The dear old governor,"
President Hayes' man on the floor reported, "age incapacitates for action." An old granny, crotchety and vain," wrote another observer, and yet another grumbled that Dennison was "a ghost from the past who lacked the discretion to fade away." Yet Dennison was only in his mid-sixties.

William Dennison campaigned for Garfield as enthusiastically as his flesh would allow, and was elated by his friend's victory in November. "The nation stands! No more solid South. Your calumniations are silenced forever!" he wired the new President. Both men knew that Dennison was really saying the rebels had been staved off again.

The daily struggle with his illnesses soon wore William Dennison down, and his interest in events around him began to fade. He was seen in the Deshler Block less and less throughout the next year, and for the last time in February 1882. In July 1881, news from Washington of the shooting of Garfield came as a blow to Dennison, and he was too ill to attend his friend's funeral in November. Dennison was also too ill to respond, and may not have been told, when a group of financial predators from Cleveland raided the Columbus and Hocking Valley Railroad in July 1881, and seized control from the Dennison faction.36

William Dennison died at his home in Columbus on June 15, 1882, at the age of 66, from complications of mitral
valvular disease, stomach and bowel disease, bronchitis, and prostate disease.  

Epilogue:  

By 1882, Mary Halderman Dennison's financial circumstances had become desperate. Left with little or no financial support from her husband, Neil's wife tried to support herself and her children by performing professionally on stage, but her rewards did not match her talents. Embarrassed by their daughter-in-law's plight, and concerned for their grandchildren, Dennison and Anne took Neil's family into their home as dependents shortly before Dennison's death. Soon after Dennison's funeral, Anne and youngest daughter Jane departed for Europe on an extended tour, leaving Mary in charge of the household. But vibrant and beautiful Mary took suddenly ill and died of pneumonia on December 15, 1882. Neil returned for his wife's funeral, sitting boldly among his children in the front pew of Trinity Church. He then buried Mary in the Dennison family plot at Greenlawn Cemetery and promptly returned to Colorado, leaving his children in the care of relatives.  

In sole control of the substantial family fortune, Anne went on to a long widowhood during which she outlived most of her children, became a prominent real estate developer in Columbus, and was always a lioness of society. She built
a new home at 77 Smith Place, and another in Bar Harbor, Maine, dividing her time between the two residences. Anne died in Columbus on August 1, 1911, at the age of 89.39

Alen Dennison became a physician practicing in New York and Columbus until the outbreak of the Spanish American War. Dr. Dennison volunteered as a military surgeon, accompanied the American expeditionary force to Cuba, and contracted malaria. He never recovered from his illness, and died a bachelor in Hot Springs, Arkansas on December 30, 1910.40

Herman remained in private law practice in Columbus. Most of his practice involved representing his mother in the management of the family fortune, though there seems little doubt that Anne was ever the final decisionmaker. Herman never married, and died on July 21, 1912 in an automobile accident along the Scioto River just north of Columbus.41

Neil lived to age 63 in Denver, becoming a prominent attorney, president of the Buckeye Club, and a fixture of Western society. When he died on December 31, 1904, Anne was still very much alive. Neil's remains were returned to Columbus and interred at Greenlawn Cemetery, but not in the family plot. The remains of Mary Halderman Dennison had been exhumed in 1884 and re-interred in a small plot some distance away. Neil was buried next to her.42
On a crisp, brilliant morning in April 1993, the understated baronial elegance of the Dennison family plot dominated a slight hill in the old section of Greenlawn Cemetery in Columbus, Ohio. A large polished granite monolith bore the single word DENNISON, and before it were the flush-mounted gravemarkers of William and Anne. Behind the monolith the graves of fourteen others, children, grandchildren, and more, formed a double row, like guardsmen on parade. Three hundred yards away, down the hill and out of sight, considerable searching revealed one very different grave. DENNISON stood out faintly in bas-relief across the rounded top of a headstone. The stone was soft and many years' exposure had turned it grey, streaked with black. The letters of the name had been spalled almost to illegibility by many winters. Bending down, one could read on its face, "Mary Catherine Dennison." Next to Mary's was another stone, and closer inspection revealed it to be virtually identical to Mary's, of the same material, probably made about the same time, perhaps by the same craftsman. But only the back of the stone was visible. Buried in the turf, the assistance of a good-natured groundskeeper was necessary to turn it over. "William Neil Dennison" was clearly readable. The face of the stone, buried and protected by two inches of rich loam, was almost its original white, and the inscription was crisp and
sharp, in stark contrast to Mary's. It must have been lying on its face for a very long time.

Looking up, one sensed the regal figure of a small, erect woman in black lace staring down in cold fury from near the top of the hill. But no, it was only the play of morning shadows among the birches.
ENDNOTES

CHAPTER X


5Whyte, Uncivil War, 27-58; Congress, House, Governance of the Capital, ibid; Green, Village and Capital, 363-382.

6Green, Village and Capital, 361-362; Donald, Liberty and Union, 252; Whyte, Uncivil War, 236-236, 263.
7Whyte, Uncivil War, 272-284; Green, Village and Capital, 389-396.


13Charles R. Williams, Diary and Letters of Rutherford Birchard Hayes (Columbus: The Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1924), Vol. III, 375, 378; Keith I. Polakoff, The Politics of Inertia (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973) 208-209; Telegram, W. Dennison to W. Hayes, November 12, 1876, letter, Dennison to Hayes, November 1, December 9, and 13, 1876, Hayes to Dennison, December 17, 1876, Hayes Presidential Papers.

14The Washington Nation, November 29, 1876; Unidentified newspaper clipping, December 1, 1876, Clippings Files, Hayes Presidential Papers.
15 W. Dennison to R. Hayes, December 13, 1876, Hayes Presidential Papers.


17 Donald, Liberty and Union, 259-263; C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South 1877-1913 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 44-45; Hoogenboom, Presidency of Hayes, 47-49; Davison, Presidency of Hayes, 43.


19 W. Dennison to R. Hayes, May 2, 1878, W. Dennison to B. Bristow, May 16, 1878, Hayes Presidential Papers.

20 W. Dennison to R. Hayes, February 1, 1877, Hayes Presidential Papers.

21 W. Dennison to B. Bristow, May 16, 1878, Hayes Presidential Papers.

22 Columbus Daily Dispatch, June 5, 1878; Ohio State Journal, June 8, 1878; Greenlawn Cemetery Records.


26 The Columbus Dispatch, March 14 and 15, April 3, 4, and 7, 1879; History of Franklin and Pickaway Counties, 94, 1879.

27 The Columbus Dispatch, April 7, 1879; Columbus Citizen, January 2, 1905; W. Dennison to J. Garfield, September 11, 1880; James A. Garfield Presidential Papers, Library of Congress, The Denver Times Sunday, November 24, 1901.


31 Reeves, Gentleman Boss, 178-184; New York Times, June 9, 1880.

32 Reeves, Gentleman Boss, ibid.
33Peskin, Garfield, 480.


35W. Dennison to J. Garfield, November 3, 1880, Garfield Presidential Papers.


37Trinity Church Parish Records, June 15, 1882; The Cincinnati Gazette, ibid; The Ohio State Journal, June 16, 1882; The Daily Dispatch, June 15, 1882.


39The Columbus Dispatch, August 1, 1911; Ohio State Journal, August 2, 1911, March 11, 1923; Columbus Citizen Journal, February 18, 1977; The First Ladies of Ohio (Columbus: The Ohio Historical Society, 1970), 13.

40Greenlawn Cemetery Records; Columbus Evening Dispatch, December 30, 1910.

41Greenlawn Cemetery Records; Columbus Evening Dispatch, 31 July, 1912.

42Greenlawn Cemetery Records; Rocky Mountain News, January 1, 1905.
CHAPTER XI

AN ASSESSMENT

How is the life of William Dennison to be assessed?

William Dennison was a second-tier personage in the politi­
cal life of mid-nineteenth century America. The major
histories of Ohio during the Civil War and the early Gilded
Age give scant attention to Dennison, concentrating instead
upon Salmon P. Chase, Benjamin Wade, and John Sherman as
the bright lights of the founding generation of Ohio
Republicans.¹ But the life of William Dennison is in­
structive in at least three respects. First, his governor­
ship of Ohio during the initial nine months of the Civil
War produced his most significant achievements. His man­
agement of Ohio recruiting and his active pursuit of the
aims of Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party influenced
the early course of the conflict, particularly in the West.
Second, Dennison's role as a party insider, as a concilia­
tor, and as a cooperationist within the Union-Republican
spectrum made a significant impact upon the practical out­
come of politics during the period, both in Ohio and in the
nation. The third way in which the life of William Dennison
is instructive is as an example of a mid-nineteenth century

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Republican ideologue. Dennison was a member of a proud and idealistic generation of Americans, certain in its righteousness and intransigent in the face of opposition, even as it divided into irreconcilable camps to confront itself in civil war.

If William Dennison's war governorship embraced his most significant life achievements, then foremost among these must be his success in raising troops. To raise and field an army of over one hundred thousand men in less than nine months is no small achievement in any age. The day of the yeoman citizen soldier in the Cincinnatus tradition with his musket ready above his cabin door had long passed, if it had ever truly existed in America. Dennison raised an army starting from an ineffective and discredited state militia organization, a bare arsenal, and a generally incompetent military staff.

Dennison's most inspired recruiting innovation was his decision to take away responsibility for raising troops from the regional brigade and division headquarters of the old common militia and give it to city, township, and county military committees comprised of leading citizens. This played directly to civic pride to fill out state regiments and it made the raising of Ohio troops for the Civil War a political process, not a military process.
Dennison understood that involuntary conscription was a civic as well as a personal shame to the nineteenth century American. If arms were necessary to defend society, then it must be the duty of all citizens to march. The notion that the state should compel individuals to perform their civic duty was abhorrent. The drafted man was shameful, and the fact that he was drafted shamed his neighbors. Recruiting by military committees also meant that known local civic leaders solicited recruits, not uniformed outsiders. While some military recruiters did visit towns drumming replacements for existing regiments depleted by casualties and disease, most recruiting during the Dennison governorship was of complete new regiments, regiments of neighbors solicited by neighborhood leaders.

Had Dennison been reelected, he would no doubt have found it necessary to direct a draft of the common militia rolls in late 1862 to meet incessant federal calls for troops, just as his successor did. The first hundred thousand or so Ohioans to enlist represented the limits of voluntarism in the state, regardless of republican values and Victorian sensibilities. Just as in the rest of the nation, both North and South, Ohioans were taken under arms against their will as the Civil War dragged on, as casualties mounted, and as the size of opposing armies surpassed anything the continent had ever known. The scope of the
war, the insatiable demand for men, depletion of the pool of true volunteers, and bloody draft riots in major cities led the federal government to take over recruiting from the states, but not until late in the war. Yet during the David Tod administration in 1862 it became necessary to hold a state draft in Ohio, and it was the state military committees that set up and supervised the draft mechanism and conducted the lotteries, insuring that Ohio's draft process remained a local civic and political matter. There was opposition to the draft in Ohio, many men ran away to Canada and the Western frontier to avoid conscription, and a few cases of armed resistance erupted, but Ohio's draft organization, managed through local military committees, was remarkably successful. The credit for setting up this state mechanism belongs to Dennison. Dennison left a structure in place that his successors had only to follow. It was a signal achievement.

The Civil War soldier did not have much by way of personal equipment when compared to soldiers of America's later wars. A rifle musket, simple clothing, beans, hardtack, coffee, bacon, and a haversack to pack it in were the lot of Billy Yank or, when he was lucky, Johnny Reb. Governor William Dennison had no such supplies, or practically none, when thousands of fire-eyed volunteers inundated Columbus in April 1861, ready for war. In spite
of pleas by Dennison, Adjutant General Henry B. Carrington, and Dennison's predecessor as governor, Salmon P. Chase, very little war matériel was stored in Ohio arsenals when the war started. It was not simply a matter of buying the stuff of war and stacking it up in armories and warehouses. Foodstuffs spoiled and had to be purchased more or less as needed. The many leather goods of nineteenth century armies — saddles, harnesses, cartridge boxes, belts, and scabbards — needed regular cleaning and oiling lest they mildew and rot. Firearms needed periodic cleaning lest they rust. Stored munitions were dangerous, and subject to damage from exposure. A well-filled military arsenal required constant care by skilled armorers and other craftsmen, and was therefore expensive to maintain as well as to stock. Peace-time legislators had better things to do with the people's money, particularly when they sensed no threat of war.

The comic-opera scramble to feed, house, and equip the first volunteers in the opening week of the war was the source of much criticism of the Dennison war effort, a small part of it justified. It was only a matter of days before some order became apparent among the volunteers, and only weeks before the military staff was reorganized and hastily purchased supplies became available. Dennison's first mistake, and the most serious mistake of his governorship, was not directing that the thousands of recruits
thronging Columbus during the week of April 14 be enrolled and sent home to await a call. A quick glance at the size of the throng should have convinced the governor that even if one third or more of them "lost their ardor" and dodged a later call he would still have enough for the first levy from the federal government. Had Carrington and his side-kicks of the state militia staff been stationed at tables in the Capitol rotunda and the volunteers paraded past, enrolled, enumerated, sworn into state service, given a travel voucher home with instructions to await a call, and regaled with a rousing dose of Dennisonianism, most of the initial muck-up would have been avoided and the Dennison administration would have appeared efficient. But in retrospect, this initial blunder, though unfortunate and wasteful, was almost trivial, particularly when compared to the momentous events which followed.

And the remaining efforts of the Dennison administration to supply Ohio's initial levies for the Civil War were solid achievements. Christopher C. Wolcott was an unsung hero of the early war years, both in Ohio and in Washington. Wolcott's quiet efficiency as a military purchasing agent, his careful and effective lobbying in Washington, and his perceptive intelligence work were invaluable to Dennison and to the Ohio war effort. The steady and efficient management provided by Catharinius P.
Buckingham and the others with whom Dennison replaced Carrington and his acolytes led to many contracts for war goods that could be purchased from the local economy, to the effective State Laboratory munitions plant, and to the reconditioning and modernization of obsolescent arms. Dennison also proved to be a competent manager in his own right. The polite patrician with the tortured syntax was forceful and effective when dealing within a bureaucratic structure. By May 1861, only a few weeks from the start of mobilization, two Ohio regiments were in Washington, eleven regiments were outfitted at Camp Dennison under George McClellan, and at least nine more were armed, clothed, and equipped under state orders at fairgrounds throughout the state. That was a good job by any standards.

Finally, there is no evidence that Dennison ever profited improperly under the standards of his day from any public office he held in his lifetime. He seems to have been a scrupulously honest man who respected the public purse and who, for the most part, managed public funds intelligently and well.

As significant as raising and outfitting troops was to the war effort, this was not the only important contribution of William Dennison's governorship. Dennison's active involvement in the affairs of the Western border region—Kentucky and western Virginia—was also important to the
early course of the war. Dennison was aware of Abraham Lincoln's concern that nothing be done to drive Kentucky to the Confederates. While personally doubtful that Kentucky could be saved for the Union, Dennison labored loyally to further the President's policy. Dennison's initiatives towards Governor Beriah Magoffin did not precipitate an open rupture between Kentucky and the Union, most likely fueled McGoffin's continued indecision and vacillation, and may have contributed to the frustration of Confederate agitations in Kentucky. That frustration of rebel aims eventually led to a Southern invasion of Kentucky, which in turn gave cover to a Union counter-thrust and occupation of the state. It seems clear that Dennison was consciously following Lincoln's policy as he understood it, that he was by no means a meddlesome bungler, and that his efforts were useful.

Another success of the Dennison governorship was the Cleveland Conference of governors. The historian who has most closely investigated this meeting of the Western Republican governors in early May 1861 concluded that it was the high water mark of attempted control over the war by the governors and the beginning of assertion of control by Lincoln, leading eventually to a diminution of the role of governors and state legislatures in all aspects of national life. Yet the evidence is clear that such was not
Dennison's aim as the conference organizer. Dennison never saw his role as leading the war in the West. On the contrary, he cautioned his fellow governors against such a notion. Dennison believed from the start that only the federal government should direct military operations, but he was insistent that the federals get busy and do something in the West, and end their dawdling and preoccupation with the Washington environs.

This leads to two related observations. First, the frequent interruptions to telegraph and mail links between Washington and the West, including Columbus, during the first few weeks of the war had a telling effect upon Dennison and his fellow war governors. No doubt the activities of Confederate forces at Harper's Ferry and other places along the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and its adjacent telegraph caused some of the interruptions, but general confusion and administrative bungling may have played a part also, and sabotage by Confederate sympathizers in the Post Office and in telegraph companies cannot be ruled out. A great many references to these interruptions can be found in the telegrams and letters of leading figures during those first few weeks, and William Coggeshall's diary as Dennison's private secretary also makes plain the frustration felt by Dennison and others at not knowing what was going on in the nation's capital.
This uncertainty, coupled with Dennison's conviction that his first duty was the defense of Ohio, and his fears, real or imagined, that Confederate forces were gathering to invade the state, led the governor to raise additional regiments above the state's quota and withhold artillery from McClellan in Cincinnati until he was sure that he would not have to act alone to defend Ohio.

Second, there is no evidence in McClellan's writings, in Dennison's gubernatorial papers, nor in Coggeshall's diary, that McClellan or General-in-Chief Winfield Scott ever confided to Dennison Scott's plan to stay on the defensive along the Ohio through the summer of 1861 and to conduct an offensive down the river valleys to New Orleans in the fall and winter. Dennison would probably have argued against such a plan, most likely all the way to Lincoln, since it is clear that Dennison's goal was to establish a forward defensive line in the western Virginia foothills, well away from Ohio's borders, as soon as possible. But the fact that he was most likely kept in the dark explains why Dennison was so vocal pushing for an offensive in the summer. He believed that the federals were befuddled and had no plan. Like so many other wartime leaders before and since, Dennison was grappling with uncertainty. In such circumstances he did what he thought was right at the time and set about adjusting matters as he gained more information. His alternative was impotence.
Dennison's posture towards western Virginia and the Wheeling secession movement was similarly motivated. Dennison did abet the secession movement, both overtly and covertly, as did Governor Andrew G. Curtin of Pennsylvania. No doubt this was motivated by fundamental antislavery and pro-Union ideology on Dennison's part, but primarily it was motivated by his desire to defend Ohio. It was better to have the proud and mighty Virginians fighting each other than marching into Ohio. Wolcott's covert mission to Wheeling in May 1861 convinced Dennison that the Wheeling plotters should not be relied upon, however, and he backed away. When Virginia Confederate forces descended into the Ohio River valley to cut the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, Scott's wait-for-winter scheme became politically if not militarily untenable, and McClellan was directed into Virginia by Scott, not Dennison. Yet Dennison took the lead in putting political pressure on Scott and Lincoln to act. Dennison soon learned that trying to persuade McClellan to act was like pushing on a string. McClellan was a federal officer after May 3, and he followed Scott or Lincoln's directions, not Dennison's wishes. As soon as the decision was taken to invade Virginia, all the state forces Dennison had been husbanding were immediately at McClellan's disposal. Dennison's actions were always consistent with his stated position that Ohio and the West should be
defended by a forward defense, and that the federal government should do so.

In light of these accomplishments as a war governor, why was William Dennison subject to such ridicule and bad press? In large measure it was because of his personality. Dennison was a proud Western patrician, prickly about his dignity, and given to standing foursquare upon ceremony. His "frittered in polish" image haunted him throughout his public life and could never be shaken off because it was essentially a correct characterization. This very sense of propriety and reserve prevented Dennison from publicly defending, justifying, or even explaining, his actions while in office. Very few Ohioans had any idea of the difficulties and complexities of mass mobilization in 1861, or even how to judge success or failure of such an enterprise. Most of the misinformed or outright silly criticism of the state's mobilization effort could have been answered by the simple question "what is the alternative?" In such a climate no government can expect initial public support without a well-executed public information campaign, something Dennison the idealist would have found at least improper if not downright insulting to both himself and to the electorate.

Dennison's long-standing spat with Salmon P. Chase hurt him as well, particularly in his bid for the Senate in
1861, and it probably kept him from a job in the Lincoln Administration before 1864. There was also an imperious side to Dennison's nature that was particularly evident when he was dealing within a hierarchical public service bureaucracy. This often led him to be curt and sometimes condescending, though ever polite, to federal cabinet officers, military department commanders, logistics officers, and later, executives of railroad under contract to the Post Office, whenever he judged them remiss. Dennison made enemies.

Dennison's testy relationship with the press was also part of his difficulty. His censorship of the telegraph in the first few days of the war infuriated both Democratic and Republican editors. The fact that he was willing to allow brash and impolite reporters to discover his annoyance with them did not help either. Where a little legwork or a few smart questions could have turned an embarrassing story into a complimentary one, not many reporters seemed willing to make the effort for Dennison. The judgments of historians about the Dennison governorship have been greatly, perhaps overly, influenced by the classic regional history Ohio in the War by journalist, politician, diplomat, and Gilded Age raconteur, Whitelaw Reid. Reid's account of Dennison, or more precisely of Dennison's Republican administration, is generally complimentary, but
overall the governor is damned by faint praise. It is instructive that Reid was a young reporter in his twenties during the Dennison governorship, working for Cincinnati and Columbus Republican newspapers, on the Statehouse beat. Caught up in the initial enthusiasm of war in April 1861, Reid approached Carrington and Dennison for a commission in Ohio forces only to be rebuffed, no doubt coloring his perception of the governor. Also, although the commemorative 1895 edition of *Ohio in the War* that graces Ohio research libraries is the most popular version, the book was first published in 1867, when Dennison was still alive and in political decline among hard-line Republicans, seen as a waffler and a compromiser with the old Union wing.5 It was also when Reid was establishing himself as a "grand mogul" of the haughty New York Republican press, as a leading ideologue of the Republican right wing, and when he was on his way to part ownership of the *New York Herald*. Reid was a careful journalist, and his account appears factually correct, but he was also a participant in the times, and his judgments are partisan.

But it was not a churlish press, nor a priggish personality, nor his enemies, nor bad luck, that cost William Dennison his party's renomination for governor. In the summer of 1861 Dennison was seen as too radical to draw War Democrats to the state Union-Republican ticket in the fall,
so the insiders dropped him. It was his very success as a war governor that did him in.

If his war governorship was William Dennison's greatest achievement, his political service as a party insider, particularly during his many stints on the central committee of the Ohio Republican party, was his second most important contribution. Dennison, like Chase, sensed that a national party needed more than one issue to be viable. Dennison also understood that a national or state-wide party must build as broad a coalition as possible to prevail at the polls. In all his service as a Republican insider, Dennison was an active cooperationist and conciliator, trying to reconcile the more conservative elements of the Cincinnati wing with the more radical Cleveland wing, and working to harmonize the conflicting local and regional interests that made up his fractious party. As political passions rose, centrists like Dennison often found themselves criticized for not being team players. In fact, Dennison was the consummate team player all his political life.

This centrist and cooperationist side to Dennison's nature also explains why he was quick to embrace the Union-Republican wartime coalition. Even while Benjamin Wade and his fellow hard-liners in the Cleveland wing of
the Ohio Republican Party remained adamant, Dennison and the majority of the insiders realized that a coalition with some elements of the Democratic Party would be necessary to keep Ohio in the Union camp. Enough Democrats saw the preservation of the Union as paramount to any other considerations that a War Democrat faction was willing to join the Republicans in the uneasy Union-Republican coalition, fielding candidates under a Union Party banner. To Dennison the choice was clear: support the Union-Democrat coalition or see his party, his ideals, and the Union, go down. This is why, unlike his successor David Tod, Dennison accepted rejection for renomination with his patrician's outward grace, though it stung.

Dennison's labors for the party after his governorship and before Lincoln appointed him to the cabinet were his most significant contributions as an insider. Dennison's cold-blooded maneuvering under the "Ohio Plan" to dump Tod just as he himself had been dumped may have been callous, but it was probably necessary. The Clement Vallandingham challenge for the Ohio governorship was serious, not only for Ohio Republicans but, more important, for the Union. A Peace Democrat governor in the Ohio Statehouse, backed by a Peace Democrat legislature, particularly if joined by similar regimes in Indiana and Illinois, would have had profound consequences for the Union. Lincoln may have
concluded he was forced to take over those state governments for example, precipitating a Constitutional crisis of unfathomable proportions. Events may even have been put into motion leading to a negotiated peace, or fracturing the Union, thus changing the history of North America. Whether such fears might appear silly in retrospect, they were real to Dennison and his contemporaries. The "Ohio Plan" and the scheme to allow soldiers to vote from the field were important initiatives. Even if historians have since determined that they were not decisive, they were believed to be at the time. John Hunt Morgan's ill-conceived raid into Ohio, other Confederate battlefield reverses, Union battlefield gains and, most of all, the sobering effect of the huge cost of the war in blood and treasure, were no doubt more important influences in stiffening the Northern electorate to the Union cause in 1863. But Dennison's inside leadership was significant, and probably the main reason Lincoln tapped him for the cabinet.

After Lincoln's assassination, Dennison found himself trying to bridge a widening gulf between the Andrew Johnson and the Radical Republican wings of his national coalition party. Dennison the cooperationist, Dennison the party loyalist, strove mightily to that end. He sensed that his efforts were failing as early as late 1865 but he perse-
vered until he had damaged his reputation within the Republican wing of the coalition by appearing to coddle the left and until that left openly connived against him because he would not join it. Was this out of a sense of party loyalty? Was it out of fear of a pro-Southern Democratic win if the Union-Republicans sundered? Or was it only the machinations of a vain, second-rate politician trying to hold on to the prestige of high government office? The evidence on this matter is fuzzy, though in light of Dennison's motives and actions throughout his life, it is most likely that he acted to keep the coalition together and in fear of "the rebels returning to power." Dennison did not have the influence nor the political skill to pull that off, and he was injured politically in the trying. Given Johnson's frame of mind and the Radical's intransigence, it is not likely that any contemporary in national circles could have succeeded. Dennison's mistake was in not recognizing that sooner.

The life of William Dennison is also an example of a mid-nineteenth century American ideologue. His comfortable, privileged, and stimulating upbringing prepared him to embrace the wave of idealism and absolutism that engulfed his generation of Americans. William Dennison and his generation did not sacrifice to establish a new nation nor,
for the most part, to tame the wilderness. Dennison's generation took the achievements of their elders as the established order of things, as their birthright, and then plunged boldly into profound idealistic challenges to that order with little regard that they might tear the underlying social fabric. The lofty idealism of William Bebb and Robert Hamilton Bishop shaped Dennison's character all his life. He became an uncompromising foe of the extension of slavery into the territories while he kept to the old Whig faith of private enterprise abetted by government. As the slavery controversy played out in national tragedy, Dennison came to embrace emancipation and equal justice before the law, though he never advocated racial equality. As his generation divided over slavery and faced itself in civil war, each side so certain in its righteousness that it would sacrifice its sons, Dennison was able to take his place among his party's leaders with the clear conscience of the truly committed.

When the Civil War was over, America had changed in ways that Dennison never fully understood. Dennison never stopped fighting the righteous fight. But a new generation had fought the war that their elder's idealism had begun. When it was over they were not idealists, but blooded pragmatists, preoccupied with what was, not with what should be. To those new pragmatists, Dennison was an old
warhorse, a bumbling, priggish old man to be made use of, but not followed.
ENDNOTES

CHAPTER XI


5Reid, Ohio in the War, 1895 edition, iii; James G. Smart, A Radical View: The "Agate" Dispatches of Whitelaw Reid, 1861-1865 (Memphis: Memphis State University
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